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Fictionalizing Juárez: Feminicide, Violence, and Myth-Making in the Borderlands

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Fictionalizing Juárez: Feminicide, Violence, and Myth-Making in the Borderlands

by

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Dedication

Para Raquel, my second mother, and all the brave women in my life that taught me what it means to survive even in the worst of circumstances.

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Abstract

Fictionalizing Juárez: Feminicide, Violence, and Myth-Making in the Borderlands

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In the early 1990s, a series of gruesome murders of young women in Ciudad Juárez, a city located in the U.S.-Mexico border, shook the political landscape of Mexico. A decade later, the strange and violent murders, known as the feminicides or *feminicidios* of Juárez, reached international infamy across hemispheres and continents. During this time, the city and the cases became the subjects of an extensive body of scholarship and of any imaginable artistic medium (narrative, poetry, theater, performance, music, and so on). Eventually, the complexity and overexposure of the cases and the sociopolitical conditions of Ciudad Juárez placed them at the center of a paradoxical debate: on one hand, the work of activists, feminists, and scholars of social sciences (like anthropologists and sociologists) studied the murders as a localized example of a larger phenomenon of mysoginistic violence; on the other, journalistic and media investigations of Juárez understood the murders as the products of specific agents (serial killers, murderers, drug cartels, amongst others) and the fractures within the Mexican Nation-State. And yet, despite the expansion and overlapping of these discourses, fictional representations of Juárez remained tangential

to this intricate debate. Thus, this research explores the different ways in which writers, artists, and filmmakers deployed and negotiated existent perspectives on the feminicides within fictional environments.

As a result of the vast amount of published work available on Ciudad Juárez, I narrowed the objects of my research through a transnational scope. The resulting sample of texts transverses borders (Mexico and the U.S.), continents (Latin America and Europe), genres (fiction and nonfiction), and mediums (literature and film). The first chapter explores the connections of Sergio González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* and Roberto Bolaño's *2666* through the theoretical framework of the possible worlds of fiction. The second chapter moves to issues of representation, gender, and race through the analysis of two novels written by Chicana scholars: Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* and Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez*. Finally, the third chapter focuses on film representations of Juárez and the feminicides in the form of Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* and Carlos Carrera's *Backyard/El Traspatio*.

Keywords: Ciudad Juárez, feminicides, U.S.-Mexico border, Latin American literature, Chicana literature, film studies

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2013, anthropologist Marcela Lagarde y de los Rios gave a lecture on the feminicides[1] of Juárez at UT Austin. Revisiting most of the material presented in her preface of *Terrorizing Women* (edited by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, 2010), the lecture opened some interesting questions for my own research. According to her survey of the available material on Ciudad Juárez and the infamous murders of women that occurred in that bordertown in the early 1990s, Lagarde (2010) asserted that investigative approaches to the murders are diverse, but mainly fall in two camps: "The simplistic and traditional points of view have helped generate fantastic myths; the more evolved views have made very important contributions to profound and complex scientific knowledge not only of the violence but also of its relationship to patriarchal social organization and patriarchal power" (p. xiv). A day later, the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies hosted a brown-bag seminar for students and the anthropologist. I told Lagarde how I was interested in researching fictional representations of Ciudad Juárez and the ways that these texts have shaped our understanding of the city in the last twenty years. Then, I asked her if she could elaborate on the point regarding these "mythical" narratives of the murders. Lagarde expressed her concerns about how all of the narratives had the unintended effect of demonizing Juárez, constructing it as a savage space with no agents for hope or survival. The example that

[1] Throughout this research, I use the term *feminicide* instead of the more commonly used term *femicide* because I am following Lagarde's reframing of the term from established feminist approaches to gendered violence, "The translation for femicide is *femicidio*. However, I translated femicide as *feminicidio*, and this is how it has circulated. In Spanish, *femicidio* is homologous to homicide and solely means the homicide of women" (Lagarde, 2009, p.xiii). In this sense, feminicide implies, in more clear terms, the gender dimension of these types of crimes. It is worth noting, however, that, according to Melissa W. Wright, the term feminicidio started to circulate in Mexico since the early 90s thanks to the efforts of activist Esther Chávez Cano (Wright, 2010, p. 7).

she used to describe this phenomenon was the book *Huesos en el desierto* (2002)[2]. She pointed out that the main mistake of its author, Mexican journalist and writer Sergio González Rodríguez, was that "he novelized too much" ("*novelo demasiado*"). Another consequence of these types of journalistic accounts is that the authors unintentionally became "authoritative"[3] voices on the city, the murders, and the complex sociopolitical environment of Juárez.

Lagarde's comments, the discussion, and her essay reveal three fascinating implications, which tend to be ignored when discussing the issues of feminicide and cultural representations of Juárez. First, the notion that multiple and competing viewpoints[4] exist about the cases. However, all the numerous discourses surrounding the murders overlap and intersect in multiple ways. They also simultaneously contradict each other. Second, the idea that the nature and context of the cases led to speculation and *fictionalizing*, a fact evidenced in how Juárez became the focus of numerous artistic mediums such as novels, films, journalistic accounts, theater, public performance, poetry, music, and so on. And third, the implication that the symbolic construction of Juárez rests in a paradoxical position: on one hand, representations of the city and the U.S.-Mexico border as an alien, or hellish, space where violence exists, "as an unusual, exceptional occurrence that only happens there and only in that way" (Lagarde, 2010, p. xiv). On the other hand, Juárez serves as a localized example of feminicide, which exists as a global

[2]*Huesos en el desierto* ("Bones in the desert") consists of a series of rewritten articles about the murders that González Rodríguez published in the late 1990s in the *Reforma* newspaper. The book was one of the first mainstream publications about the cases and was published in Spain in 2002 due to threats of censorship from the Juárez government. Througout this research I will use the 2006 Mexican edition.

[3] In other words, some authors assumed the role of "experts" of the cases without sociological or anthropological training. I believe that this type of comment undermines the political role that journalistic articles had in exposing the murders regardless of their sensationalized or voyeuristic nature.

[4] For a comprehensive list of all the existing theories about the cases, see Appendix A.

phenomenon and in a diverse number of urban contexts (regardless of the developed or underdeveloped status of a country).

In this intricate and impenetrable context, Lagarde's criticism constructs an antithetical binary on the question of intellectual authority over Juárez: journalists understanding the cases as the products of specific culprits and accomplices (serial killers, murderers, amongst other), while positioned against the work of activists, feminists, and scholars of social sciences (like anthropologists and sociologists) who have attempted to understand the murders through qualitative and quantitative research in the context of misogynistic sexual violence. Still, this simplistic binary erases the presence of a third line of cultural production, that is, visual, artistic or fictional portrayals of Juárez. Thus, what is the place of these texts in the ongoing debate over the murders of women in the Borderlands? The most obvious implication of this question is that any text attempting to represent Juárez will be forced to *negotiate* the clashing discourses about the city and the cases. In other words, these texts, in one way or another, will *choose* one of the two existing perspectives. Are the texts exploring the conditions and effects of feminicide? Or are they simply speculating and understanding Juárez as a singular exceptional phenomenon of violence enacted by a select group of suspects?

Overall, the debates and questions presented above reflect the personal and intellectual journey I experienced when reviewing the vast amount of work published on Ciudad Juárez. Like any other research, this project evolved in multiple ways. Nonetheless, the realization of this ongoing conflict concerning intellectual authority over a city like Juárez led me to believe that we must rethink the ways in which we have come to conceptualize the issue of feminicide along the U.S.-Mexico border. In this sense, there are two important reasons why I decided to focus my research on fictional representations of Juárez: 1) These texts provide clear evidence of the contradictory

discourses that shaped and reinscribed the cases in the national and international imaginary of the last decade; and 2) a fictional space (whether visual or textual) serves as an environment where we can analyze the negotiation of these competing perspectives and points of view. As a consequence, and based on these two dimensions, my research attempts to answer two questions: Why fictionalize Juárez? And what are the mechanisms and intentions behind this process of fictionalization?

Considering the limited nature of a thesis and the vast amount of published work available about the feminicides of Juárez, choosing the objects of study was a long and difficult process. Because Cd. Juárez and the phenomenon of feminicide is usually understood in transnational (that is, movement across borders and definite Nation-States) terms, since it bears strong interconnections with migration, border violence, NAFTA, fluxes of gendered labor and global capital, and a political and economical space situated between modernity and colonialist discourses; I narrowed the texts based on a comparative framework, taking fictional works that move between borders and even continents. At the same time, the texts function as particular examples of the ongoing debate of representation. On one extreme, we have works that symbolically "mythologize" violence: two that take to this ultimate degree are *2666* (2009), the posthumous masterpiece of Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño, and *Huesos en el desierto* (2006), González Rodríguez's journalistic treatment of the murders mentioned by Lagarde. In the opposite direction, the novels of Chicana writers such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba (*Desert Blood*, 2005) and Stella Pope Duarte (*If I Die in Juárez*, 2008). Both novels explicitly, or implicitly, fixate on the transnational implications of representing the conditions of the border through a consideration of feminism, race, and gender. At the same time, visual representations of Juárez run parallel to these texts and are of equal

importance, since they evince the ways that genre and film techniques shape the political dimensions of Juárez and the feminicides.

Due to the limited scope of this research, works in theater, performance, poetry, music or other visual mediums are not part of the analysis. Because I am interested in the question of textual and visual mediation, the inherent corporeality (the notion of having actors in front of an audience) of theater and performance places them in a different and broader discussion. In the case of music and poetry, their distinct textuality functions on a different register of meaning and reception separated from fiction. Finally, before moving to the theoretical framework and the overview of each of the chapters, readers uninformed about the cases and the sociopolitical environment of Ciudad Juárez require a clear historical background about the events that transpired over the last twenty years. As a result of the sheer amount of information and the number of facts surrounding the cases (which have filled entire books and countless essays), any attempt at reconstructing the historical context of sexual violence in Juárez will contain gaps and omissions (for a detailed bi-national timeline, see Appendix B). For these reasons, it is worth noting that this reconstruction stems from my intellectual and academic formation in Mexico. In this sense, the use of terms like *neoliberalism* (extreme economic reforms in Third World countries, particularly Latin America, that privilege free trade and globalized networks of labor) function outside the political context of American academia. Thus, this research project is aimed at scholars, students, or readers with, at least, some basic knowledge of the cases and the Mexican (and Latin American) scholarship available on Ciudad Juárez.

OVERVIEW OF THE CASES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Sometimes considered the backyard of El Paso, other times its twin city. In essence, it represents all the illusionary constructions and stereotypes about the border: the savage space on the periphery, where alcohol was smuggled during the Prohibition Era; the city where American soldiers and students crossed to access the "exotic" brown bodies of Mexican women. The space where Jazz, drugs, and *pachucos* intersected. Ciudad Juárez was the center of the Borderlands. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s something happened: the development of *Nacional Fronterizo* (PRONAF) (1961) and *Industrialización de la Frontera* (1965) federal programs led to an unprecedented economic boom along the border (González Rodríguez, 2006). Through this process, the Mexican government refashioned Ciudad Juárez and other bordertowns as examples of modernity, which paved the way for the neoliberal (and globalized) restructuring of the Mexican Nation-State in the following decades.

One of the central factors of this transformation was the expansion of the manufacturing industry in the construction of assembly plants, colloquially known as *maquilas* in the Spanish language, where women constituted the main labor force. This reconfiguration of labor, capital between the North American countries of Canada, Mexico, and the United States, and gender roles reached its apex in the historical signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement on January 1, 1994. NAFTA allowed for the creation of Free Trade Zones (FTZ) along both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and with the elimination of tariffs, multinational companies in the United States, Europe, and Asia invested large amounts of capital in the construction of manufacturing plants in the late 1990s and early 2000s on the Mexican side, which led to a large immigration wave of women from the South to Cd. Juárez. Companies owning the *maquilas* hired women in disproportionate numbers for lower wages, which maximized profits. This sudden change

in economic conditions led to a population peak in the underdeveloped urban space of Juárez. Due to the city's deficient infrastructure and lack of housing, the city expanded in an unstable and unbalanced fashion in an already problematic geographical area (the desert of the state of Chihuahua). Lack of properly lit roads and streets, an ineffective public transportation system; and a boom in improvised housing at the outskirts of the city made the urban space an environment prone to violence and illegality (González Rodríguez, 2006).

At the same time, a number of events occurred that led to a radical shift of power in the city's hierarchy of organized crime (1993-1994). The collapse of the Colombian drug cartels, and the ascension to power of the Carrillo Fuentes organization, which resulted in the formation of the notorious Juárez cartel, inaugurated a new era of border violence (Valdez, 2006). Coupled with issues of urban infrastructure, corrupt authorities and rampant economic inequality, Ciudad Juárez became an increasingly complex reality (a space between legality and illegality located in the difficult geography of the desert of Chihuahua) that showed the consequences of globalization. Then, in the early 1990s, bodies of women started to appear in the desert of Juárez. The victims' bodies showed signs of extreme forms of sexual torture and, soon enough, journalists, activists and social scientists began to study this phenomenon, which reached international headlines in the early 2000s. Although nonprofit organizations, journalists, and civil-rights activists attempted to calculate the exact number of victims, existing data fluctuates. Overall, the official computation by the Mexican federal and local authorities indicated there were 379 victims (Aikin Araluce, 2011) in the time period between 1993-2005. Other data, like the one compiled by journalist Diana Washington Valdez, estimated 470 casualties and hundreds of disappeared women.

Although the murders reached global notoriety in less than a decade, only five particular cases ignited national indignation in Mexico. *Lote Bravo* (September 2, 1995), an empty lot where the authorities found nine victims; *Lomas de Poleo* (March, 1996), a hill near the border (eight bodies); the notorious case of *Campo Algodonero* (November 6, 2001), a cotton field (eight bodies); and the six women found in the *Cristo Negro* (February 17, 2003)[5] area. The connections and patterns present in these cases (modus operandi, witnesses accounts, physical characteristics of the victims, and so on) produced a large body of investigative journalism and broad speculation in the early 2000s. The two most well known works that deal with theories of serial killings and conspiracies of political corruption are González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* (2006) and Diana Washington Valdez's *The Killing Fields* (2006). Both books catalogued a diverse series of possible theories: businessmen killing for sport, networks of illegal organ harvesting, serial killers and a "copy-cat" pattern, the secret filming of *snuff* pornography, amongst others. In many ways, the only connective tissue between all of these threads were the inefficiency and possible involvement of the Juárez authorities (police and a certain group of politicians) in the murders and the clear links with illegal operations of the Juárez cartel. Ultimately, the political pressure by local activists, journalists, and international nonprofit organizations (such as Amnesty International) prompted a response from the local government. First, the highly publicized hiring of famed FBI profiler Robert Ressler, who concluded the murderer was a white man from El Paso. And second, the arrest of an Egyptian national, Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif, and the gang of *Los Rebeldes* (Valdez, 2006). According to the findings, Sharif was the mastermind behind the murders and he offered the gang large amounts of money for the kidnapping and

[5] The *Cristo Negro* (Black Christ) is a scaled replica of the Christ the Redeemer statue located in Rio de Janeiro.

murder of young women for his personal entertainment. Amidst clear indications that the police fabricated evidence and obtained confessions through torture, the murders continued. This fact led to the arrest of five more men, nicknamed *Los Toltecas*. Four of them were bus drivers who allegedly raped and killed *maquila* workers after their night shifts.

All of the above events occurred at the end of the 1990s and were covered via journalism. Around the same time, a group of feminist scholars (such as Melissa W. Wright, activist Esther Chavez Cano, Rosa-Linda Fregoso, and later on, Marcela Lagarde) produced a large body of research on Juárez that was eventually published in journals and essay collections in the mid-2000's. Consequently, they concluded the crimes served as prime examples of *femicide*: the misogynistic killing of women. This reading clashed with the ongoing theories because it lacked any specific culprits. Instead, the socioeconomic environment and patriarchal hegemony prevalent in Juárez created the conditions for the enactment of this type of violence with impunity. Thus, it is clear that this condensed narrative evidences the representational binary that Lagarde described. And yet, the complexity of the cases would have certainly produced a much larger network of alternative interpretations beyond this antithetical debate. In fact, and despite the large number of criticisms directed at some of the work done in Juárez, it is worth noting that these competing discourses have evolved and overlapped over time. In this sense, some of the authors discussed in this thesis realized the discrepancy and ideological negotiation that underlie representations of Juárez. The context and realities of this border city have become increasingly complex in the last decade and some authoritative voices changed or shifted their initial conclusions. The two best examples of these revisions are the major figures of investigative journalism in Juárez: Diana Washington Valdez and Sergio González Rodríguez.

Through her presence in documentaries (*Border Echoes/Ecos de una frontera*, 2007; *Bajo Juárez,* 2008), interviews, and her own book (*The Killing Fields*), Washington Valdez became one of the more vocal supporters about theories regarding the involvement of serial killers, businessmen, and politicians in the infamous murders. However, in "A Personal Note", the last section of *The Killing Fields*, Valdez (2006) acknowledges the political consequences of privileging these theories and how many of her ideas changed through the investigation and discussions with feminist scholars. This moment of self-realization is so meaningful that it is worth quoting it in full:

> At one point in the investigation, I realized I was focusing on one class of victims (the serial murder) at the expense of the other unpunished deaths. I listened to Isabel Vericat make an important point during the 2003 UCLA conference. She said the Juárez murders were all gender murders. At the time, her view seemed dramatic, but eventually I understood the significance of her words. All the unpunished crimes are of equal importance. All the murders, whether or not the victims knew the killers, reflect an abuse of power. (p. 303)

The passage clearly states that many of the murders lie in the intersections of power, gender, and other sociopolitical dimensions. Valdez first wondered why many people asked her if she became a feminist after investigating the crimes. In the end, she only asserts that, "this issue has changed all of us" (Valdez, 2006, p. 303). The note reflects a moment that is very uncommon in works centered on Juárez. The fact that a non-feminist journalist, at one point, realized the major role that gender plays in the construction of violence, exhibited how Juárez continues to be a painfully complex reality because one person cannot see a central aspect of the cases. And yet, this particular shift in discourse reveals how the feminicides can also serve as sites of social transformation and consciousness raising.

In a similar ideological move, González Rodríguez also revised the ideas and theories from his most famous book *Huesos en el desierto*, albeit in a more nuanced

form. Updating and vaguely rewriting the material of *Huesos en el desierto*, the journalist published, through the influential Semiotext(e) book series of MIT Press, *The Femicide Machine* (2012). Instead of functioning as a collection of journalistic articles, this small book (135 pages) disposes the speculative tone of *Huesos* for a more academic style and theoretical vocabulary. The most morbid or sensationalistic dimensions of the previous book (*snuff* films, narcosatanism, amongst others) are reduced to a minimum[6]. Instead, the author blames the Mexican Nation-State as the apparatus that enabled the conditions for the creation of a femicide machine, one that exist as independent from the state, while inhabiting it: "The femicide machine has characteristics that differ from the structure that supports it, and it also remains distinct from the State it inhabits. It derives strength from this autonomy, which makes fighting it difficult, because the machine tends to multiply, or to transform in an expanded, specialized reproduction" (González Rodríguez, 2012, p. 10). Anyone versed in cultural studies or theories of biopower could see that the whole book, with his continuous references to power and machines, echoes a myriad of theorists like Deleuze and Guattari, Foucalt, Hard and Negri, Agamben, and so on. However, González Rodríguez quotes none of them[7]. Instead, the journalist and writer traces the development of the cases (with a lack of specificity), the reaction of Juárez authorities; the legal and political effects of activists and scholars, the recent increase in violence due to the drug wars; and the ways that the city has been framed or represented since the early 2000s. With regard to the last of these issues, González Rodríguez delineates three major

[6] The book contains a couple of theories, particularly in the case of a group of bodies found in *El Cerro Bola* and in the reconstruction of the murder of Lilia Alejandra García Andrade. Lilia was the daughter of Norma Andrade, the founder of activist group *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*. González Rodríguez retells the events through her perspective.

[7] The only exception is a direct quote from Gerald Raunig's *A Thousand Machines*: "The machine is not limited to managing and striating entities closed off to one another, but opens up to other machines and, together with them, moves machinic assemblages. It consists of machines and penetrates several structures simultaneously. It depends on external elements in order to be able to exist at all" (quoted in González Rodríguez, 2012, p. 10).

discursive registers (the official narrative, the journalistic version, the findings of academic and international institutions, and the cultural narrative) and asserts how, "the diversity of these discourses and narratives between sectors reflects the ongoing conflict between their respective bases and aims" (p. 83). However, González Rodríguez concludes that public exposure of the cases led to a change in their status from a localized event to a transmediatic (in regards to the role of cyberactivism) and transnational phenomenon that resists "institutional 'truths" (p. 84). Thus, in similar terms to Valdez, we can trace a nuanced shift in discourse that led to the realization that the ramifications of the cases reach unpredictable and intricate dimensions that we are only beginning to comprehend.

In a different, albeit deeply interconnected, register, *The Femicide Machine* serves as an important starting point to a question that demands more critical attention. At the end of the book, González Rodríguez hints at how the feminicides reach the political mainstream in the midst of current drug war, that is, the inauguration of a new era of violence in Mexico: "The years 2000-2010 were economically lost, and a good deal of Mexico's labor force–more than ten million people– had to leave to find work: the other 'illegal' merchandise entering U.S. territory, in addition to drugs. The war machine, crime machine, and femicide machine arose and were imposed in this context" (González Rodríguez, 2012, p. 97). What were the effects of drug-related violence in the discourse of feminicide? The conflation and rearticulation of these three discourses (the machines of war, crime, and feminicide) exhibited the limits of fictional and academic representations of Juárez, which were incapable of anticipating the unprecedented magnitude of drug-related violence.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The first chapter of this research scrutinizes the complex fictional and symbolic relationship between Sergio González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* and Roberto Bolaño's "The Part of the Crimes," a section of *2666*. One of the main figures of the so-called post-Latin American boom, Bolaño reached international recognition for his elaborate satirical portrayal of bohemian poets in *The Savage Detectives* (2008). However, it is his 1000-page literary juggernaut, *2666*, written in the span of a decade, which represents the cornerstone of Bolaño's entire career and the culmination of his meta-literary project[8]. Although the novel changed and evolved over a long period of time, Bolaño always referenced it in numerous interviews and correspondence as his most ambitious project, one that could even potentially destroy him. Names and allusions changed, but the narrative core remained intact: a novel with many plot threads, characters, and spaces that intertwine in Santa Teresa, Bolaño's fictional version of Ciudad Juárez where he transfers the tragedy of the femicides to the Sonora/Arizona border.

Constructed in five parts or *novellas* ("The Part of the Critics," "The Part of Amalfitano," "The Part of Oscar Fate," "The Part of the Crimes," and "The Part of Archimboldi"), the fourth section, "The Part of the Crimes," is the most relevant to my project because of its focus in the feminicides. Of all the different sections of *2666*, "Crimes" has garnered the most critical attention due to its shocking and impenetrable structure: Bolaño chronicles the lives of dozens of characters in the space of Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez, while alternating them with clinical and forensic descriptions of hundreds of women's bodies found in the desert. By the end of the novel, Bolaño has

[8] Bolaño's entire body of work is usually described as meta-literary in the sense that all of his novels and short stories form a coherent universe of characters (which crossover and intersect one another over different eras and stories) and motifs.

created a catalogue of more than a hundred victims and their bodies. Thus, how is this section connected with González Rodríguez's journalistic investigation of the murders? Literary critics continuously point out that his book, *Huesos en el desierto*, became an important source of information for the construction of the fictional space of Santa Teresa. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that reveals how the connection between "The Part of the Crimes" and *Huesos en el desierto* cuts deeper than what this simplistic reading suggests.

Overall, my analysis in chapter one is divided in three sections. The first section consists of an historical outline of the development of fiction theory. In particular, I center on how postmodernism, the Linguistic Turn, and poststructuralism radically questioned the boundaries of historiography, nonfiction, and human communication. In order to provide a viable solution to these issues, I present the alternative view of the *possible worlds theory of fiction* as seen through the work of Czech literary theorist, Lubomír Doležel. This particular point of view is fascinating because it conceives literary fiction as a medium that can only create "incomplete" worlds. Stated differently, fictional spaces cannot encompass the totality of an external space/world. I expand this notion of the gaps and natural absences in literature with Pierre Macherey's understanding of literary production and ideology.

The second section of the chapter focuses on reconstructing the conditions in which Bolaño wrote *2666*. For more than a decade, Bolaño became increasingly obsessed with the murders happening in Juárez. In order to get an inside perspective on the cases, he initiated a long distance correspondence with González Rodríguez whose investigation and findings led to a radical rewriting of "The Part of the Crimes." Finally, the third section situates both works, *Huesos en el desierto* and "The Part of the Crimes," side to side, revealing how they exist in a symbiotic relationship as one single fictional piece. In

this sense, I conclude that "The Part of the Crimes" functions as a rewriting and fictional re-territorializing from the cold facts of the cases, presented in *Huesos en el desierto*, to the discourses of violence, horror, and evil, which permeate the interstitial spaces within González Rodríguez's work. It is clear that Bolaño remaps, in problematic and provocative ways, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction.

The second chapter of this thesis moves to issues of representation, gender, and race through the analysis of two novels written by Chicana scholars: Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* and Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez*. I many ways, these two novels reflect how the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez became notable sites of exploration in existent frameworks of Chicana feminism and contemporary border theory. However, they also reveal the limitations of these theories and how the experiences, identity politics and ideological goals of Chicana writers silences or reduces the agency of Mexican women.

In *Desert Blood*, Gaspar de Alba constructs the semi-autobiographical story of a *queer* Chicana graduate student that returns to El Paso, her hometown, in order to cross to Juárez and arrange an illegal adoption. However, through a number of circumstances, she ends up becoming an improvised detective unraveling the political riddle behind the murders. Although the novel has been commended for the critique of neoliberalism and patriarchal heteronormativity, I criticize the questionable framing of transnational adoption, the reinscription of normative discourses of family and Chicano post-nationalism; and the implications of the novel's reproduction of a neocolonialist genealogy of hardboiled fiction through the bodily identity of a Chicana butch.

On the other hand, in *If I Die in Juárez,* Stella Pope Duarte centers on the coming of age story of three Mexican girls, two *mestizas* and one Indian, and how the legacies of patriarchal control and colonialist domination shape their lives and the savage murders of

women happening in the city of Juárez. Duarte conceives masculine domination as a process permeating the entire sociocultural fabric of the border and Mexico's history to such an extent, that even Indigenous cultures and traditions fall under their toxic influence. However, I argue that the problematic portrayals of male Indian characters in the novel reproduce essentialist Chicana discourses of Indigeneity (in the dichotomy of a patriarchal and matriarchal mysticism), as well as reinscribe narratives of white execptionalism through the positive representation of Anglo-Saxon characters in the novel. I conclude the chapter with some brief thoughts about the limitations and challenges of creating a transnational and hemispheric Chicana consciousness.

Finally, the third chapter moves to film representations of Juárez and the feminicides in the form of Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* (2006) and Carlos Carrera's *Backyard/El Traspatio* (2009). On one hand, I analyze the semiotic implications of having megastar Jennifer López as the lead in *Bordertown*, the politico-visual critique that the film creates around NAFTA and transnational identities, as well as its similarities with *If I Die in Juárez* in terms of Indigenous essentialism. On the other hand, I explore how *Backyard*, a Mexican high-budgeted production, transgresses or reconfigures genre conventions in order to construct a coherent political discourse about feminicide and Ciudad Juárez. In this sense, this film represents one of the most successful attempts at solving the competing discourses that exist at the center of theoretical understandings of the city. Both films parallel each other in how they follow the strict rules and formulas of genre, but each work deploys these stereotypes in different ways and in order to achieve a variety of ideological goals. Just like the rest of the texts analyzed in this thesis, the (textual or visual) fictionalization of Juárez gives us access to the negotiation of complex political discourses through the lens of mediated cultural production.

Chapter 1

The Limits of Fiction: *Huesos en el desierto* and *2666*

Most of the existent literary criticism of *2666*, up to a certain extent, addresses the fact that "The Part of the Crimes" is largely based on the journalistic account of Sergio González Rodríguez's book, *Huesos en el desierto*. In this chapter, however, I propose an alternative reading of the connections between both texts, what is absent in the essays that attempt to uncover the complexity and darker secrets of "Crimes."[9] In this sense, I argue that "Crimes" and *Huesos en el desierto* were developed and enriched through the correspondence and fateful meeting of their respective authors. Thus, *Huesos en el desierto* stands as more than just a source of inspiration for the main section of Bolaño's *2666*. Instead, both texts embody one single project of literary representation that functions on different semiotic levels.

In order to uncover the threads of this complex semiotic relationship, I use a theoretical framework that can properly situate both works as part of a network of meaning that *reconstructs Ciudad Juárez in the divide that separates fiction and nonfiction*. Proposing a clear-cut division between a "fictional" and a "real" Cd. Juárez suggests a new set of issues: What are the differences that separate Ciudad Juárez and Bolaño's Santa Teresa (a disguised "fictional" version of Juárez)? If both texts arise from the same "material" (victims, suspects, key political figures), what separates them beyond a functional level of reception?

Naturally, the questions above can be summarized in one single problem: What is "fiction"? In systematic and traditional terms, "fiction has been defined in relation to referentiality as *non-referential*. While non-fiction refers to reality and is expected to

[9] For the rest of my research, I will shorten the title of each part of *2666* through their last nouns ("Critics", "Amalfitano", "Oscar Fate", "Crimes", and "Archimboldi").

render the truth, fiction is a product of imagination which cannot be tested for truth or falsity" (Farner, 2014, p. 8). In similar terms, Lamarque and Olsen (1994) assert, "that the fictive dimension of stories (or narratives) is explicable only in terms of a rule-governed practice" (p. 32). In other words, fiction involves "a social practice" (p. 33); an independent system of meaning that is the product of a cultural agreement *a priori*. However, these mechanistic conceptions of literature devolve into tautological assumptions that ignore the complex performative power of fiction. Readers understand literary texts in a variety of different ways beyond a collective agreement ("*it is just fiction*") because fiction exists as separate entity from our social reality. And yet, every reader acknowledges that literature rearticulates the outside world to a certain degree. Thus, these definitions failed to address matters of discourse and textual mediation, as well as the political immediacy of certain literary practices such as historiography and journalism. Consequently, the question leads us to an ongoing debate that is both problematic and dangerous when dealing with extra-textual realities. What differentiates a historian, a novelist, and a journalist? The three genres in which they work involve different degrees of representation of the outside world, but the three also involve a certain amount of imagination. At the same time, the reception of these texts involves a complex set of relations between creator and reader. Thus, we return to the initial question.

At its core, the issue involves theorizing a concrete limit between an imagined (unreal) space and a concrete representation of the outside world (a tangible space outside subjectivity). The abstract theorizing of contemporary fiction questions and problematizes these seemingly finite divides, but these frameworks can also devolve into abstract conceptualizations that plague intertextuality and postmodern literary criticism (the Linguistic Turn, claims of "true" knowledge, deconstructionism, history as narrative,

and so forth). Although these debates are useful and essential to contemporary literary theory, I believe that it is crucial to ground our theoretical perspectives in a vantage point that avoids a potential detachment of art from a political reality, of consciousness and the external world. In particular when that aforementioned reality is something as tangible as gendered violence (feminicide) and localized environments (the U.S.-Mexico border and Ciudad Juárez). Thus, the vantage point of our analysis needs to function in three levels of symbolic meaning: 1) addressing the transnational relationship of Bolaño and Rodriguez (and how their correspondence shape or altered their projects); 2) the different functional levels in which the texts operate (journalism/nonfiction against fiction) and intersect one another; and 3) how the texts metonymically construct a space ("Juárez") that exists outside the standpoint of the reader. Indeed, the key question is not whether the texts represent Juárez as a concrete object, but how the texts shape our understanding of violence along the U.S.-Mexico border and Juárez.

In order to address the problems mentioned above, as well as maintaining a critical vantage point that is grounded in the facts of the case while avoiding a layer of excessive abstractionism, my analysis is rooted in Lubomír Doležel's literary application of the philosophical *theory of possible worlds*. As a reaction to both structuralist and poststructuralist systems of narrative analysis, Doležel's theory allows the separation of fictional-nonfictional spaces without necessarily conceiving them as independent realms of representation. Although flawed and limited in its own right (in terms of how can it be applied to particular texts), the possible worlds theory sidesteps the precarious implications of falling into a full-blown deconstructionist theory. In Derrida's (1976) framework, all meaning is unstable because it always returns to a system of empty signs, "We think only in signs" (p. 50). Since no authority or concrete reality can be extracted from a metaphysics of presence, then every object of the world is mediated by an

imperfect language system. The only thing we can do in this process is to remove the layers of the sign. In the end, the reader will descend into the "delirium" of deconstruction. If everything is a system of *différance*, then every layer represents the falsity of all linguistic meaning. In the context of deconstruction, it is useless to think of *Huesos* and "Crimes" as representations of Juárez since both texts were produced in this endless cycle of linguistic mediation. However, as I stated earlier, the relation between these two texts gives access to different notions of textual performativity. *Huesos* is unanimously considered, in terms of reception and production, a nonfictional text, while "Crimes" is labeled as a pure fictional product. However, in practice, both texts exist as mirrors of each other. In other words, they are the same exact narrative, but their articulation of fictional spaces and the real world of Ciudad Juárez functions in very different ways. Therefore, choosing the Doležel framework obeys to a practical necessity of analyzing this complex relationship between worlds of fiction.

Before moving forward with Doležel and the possible worlds theory, the above arguments need to be contextualized. In the following section, I present an historical overview of recent debates in narratology and fiction theory. Mainly, I center the "postmodern challenge" that postructuralism brought to the table, the effects of the Linguistic Turn in traditional historiography, and the position (and answers) of the possible worlds theory in these developments. Then, I proceed to reconstruct the parallel production of "Crimes" and *Huesos en el desierto*, as well as presenting a close reading of the structure and motifs embedded in *Huesos* that makes it a distinct text separate from other journalistic accounts of Juárez. Ultimately, the close reading of "Crimes" and *Huesos* center on two main aspects: the semiotical and discursive production of an aesthetics of horror, and the positioning of González Rodríguez as a bridge between the fictional and nonfictional worlds of the texts. I use the term "horror" in the sense that

González Rodríguez's discourse devolves from an analysis of the sociopolitical conditions of Juárez to abstract and essentialist representations of the city as a nightmarish space that transcends human understanding. Expressed in more simple terms, politics, gender, and capitalism intersect with Juárez as the mythical location of unknown and terrifying violence. In a sense, I argue that Bolaño filters these moments in "Crimes" and takes them to its most shocking extremes. This remapping of the boundaries of fiction signals the challenges of understanding *2666* through traditional readings of literature.

POSSIBLE WORLDS OF FICTION AND THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE

In *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History*, Lubomír Doležel (2010) describes postmodernism as a reaction against any form of authority or claims to true knowledge: "It is neither an ephemeral fad nor a millennium. We are wiser because of its cultural critique, because of its ruthless deconstruction of all authority. We are wiser because we think and act with much less certainty" (p. 3). A product of the Linguistic Turn inaugurated by Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language and, eventually, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism, postmodernism shackled the foundations and limits that separate representation from a concrete "reality." By radicalizing the semantics of Saussure, Derrida exposed the metaphysics of language as a system where, "[a] free-floating language sign produces meaning only by self-reference, by the relationship of signs to signs" (Doležel, 2010, p. 8). In more simple terms, "Words do not describe or represent a world; they construct it" (p. 8). Needless to say, the main consequences of such a provocative statement result in deep questioning of what we understand as

historical/historiographical discourse and breaking the limits between the objects of the world and human consciousness.

For better or worse, the issues created by the Linguistic Turn affected the entire field of humanities and social sciences in ways that we are still struggling to understand. One of the most important of these problems, or at least the most contentious, remains the clear questioning, the direct breaking, of the borders between fiction and nonfiction. If language is self-referential system, that is, a social construction, then how can we differentiate a fictional space world from a historical world? What separates fiction and history if both use the same system of signs?[10] What is the fundamental difference between a novel and a historical narrative? Doležel (2010) argues that, "linguistic text theory and the postmodern philosophy of language" inaugurated the "postmodern challenge" (p. 16), a radical consequence that transgressed the traditional understanding of cultural-textual production in historiography. Through a conceptual revision of Barthes' "The Discourse of History" (1967), Doležel asserts that Barthes reached the "crux of the postmodern challenge" in a two-step argument that equated history and fiction at a semiotical level: historiography resorts to narrative in order to make its discourse meaningful and convincing. Thus, narrative replaces (i.e. substitutes) the "referent" for the "real". In terms of genre and style, historiography appropriates narrative from fiction, where it was developed and cultivated. Therefore, narrative history is indistinguishable from narrative (Doležel, 2010, p. 19). Naturally, I am well aware that a large body of scholarship exists about this complex debate, but delving into the dialogue is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, I recontextualize this issue because it questions the *authoritative* dimensions of historiography (and any form of nonfictional

[10] Doležel is discussing the issue of differentiation "between fictional and historical narrative" (p. 15). In the context of our analysis, "historical narrative" is synonymous to the more common label of "nonfiction."

narrative), revealing how narration is mediated through a variety of systems (language, subjectivity of the author, etc.)

Doležel points out that Barthes' argument (as well as subsequent critiques of historiography) presented "narrative" as the conceptual site of production that engendered historical discourse. As a result, history as "narrative" and its claims of producing a referent (the real world) magnified the political implications of the postmodern challenge. Whether or not Barthes' ideas made a dent in the development and theorization of historiography, "the double equation 'historical narrative = literary narrative = fictional narrative' (often in the simplified form 'history equals fiction') became a dogma, repeated without any theoretical justification by a large postmodernist chorus" (Doležel, 2010, p. 21). Indeed, the biggest limitation of equating historical and fictional narratives resides in the inherent transparency of the postmodern challenge as product of the philosophy of language that lacks a distinct purpose. Thus, attempting to "deconstruct" history lead us, in one way or another, to a delirium of signification, removing the layers of meaning in the self-referential system of language leading us to a never-ending vacuum of nothingness where the "real" (the objects of the world) once stood in. Or in more facetious terms, we could quote Gayatri Spivak's (1999) statement "that one cannot 'do' a 'deconstruction' of anything" (p. 70). Yet, the question of "true" representation remains. Can we only conceive historical discourse in the same level of signification as fiction? Doležel (2010) claims, "History, being discourse, suffers from the incurable malaise of signs, from their inability to pass from meaning to the world. The paralysis of signification cannot be remediated by a reinterpretation of the concept of discourse; a *new understanding of the notion of world* [emphasis added] is required" (p. 28). In order to construct this new "understanding" of "world" inside the language system, Doležel

proposes an alternative framework of representational *possibilities* (a possible world) that substitutes the postmodern impossibility of a "reality" as a product of discourse:

> Let us imagine a language that would give us direct access to reality. Every utterance in that language would produce or re-create that portion of the world, that actual object or state of affairs, that the utterance signifies… While awaiting a new Prometheus who would steal the divine language for us, we are confined to human language, a language with a weak performative power… The only worlds that human language is capable of creating or producing are possible worlds. (2010, p. 30)

Fictional and historical worlds are differentiated in structural, agential, linguistic and functional terms. In other words, they stand opposed to each other in a performative sense. "Historical worlds are restricted to the physically possible ones" (Doležel, 2010, p. 35), they are epistemic in nature and limited in their functions as an entry point to a possible "reconstruction of the past" (p. 34). Fictional worlds, on the other hand, "are outside truth-valuation: their sentences are neither true or false" (Doležel, 1998, p. 24). They are the products of discourse (human constructs): fictional spaces exist in a unique layer of signification. More importantly, however, fictional worlds stand apart from historical worlds because of their incompleteness, "It would take a text of infinite length to construct a complete fictional world… Finite texts, the only texts that humans are capable of producing, are bound to create incomplete worlds" (p. 169). Therefore, gaps and open structures are the fundamental characteristics of fictional narratives.

Let us take this idea of the gaps and silences in fictional spaces a little bit further through a different and more grounded perspective. In *A Theory of Literary Production*, Marxist philosopher Pierre Macherey (1978) develops a fascinating argument around the presence of voids and absences in the ideological production of literature. Macherey claims, "The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows

with form, a ground on which it traces a figure. Thus, the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a *certain absence*, without which it would not exist" (p. 85). Terry Eagleton (1976) refashions Macherey's theory as a comment on the loose, contradictory, and paradoxical presence of ideology in literature. In his view, a text "is ideologically forbidden to say certain things… Because a text contains these gaps and silences, it is always *incomplete*" (p. 35). In other words, Eagleton claims that Macherey envisions literature as "de-centered," a textual utterance that exists in an inconsistent and unstable space of meanings. Indeed, "what the work *cannot say* is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey" (p. 87). Thus, the explicit and the implicit are not independent; they presuppose one another. In more simple terms, the authors of narratives, consciously or unconsciously, hide or exhibit certain aspects of the worlds they wish to represent. Indeed, as readers we perceive and decode these gaps, which serve as specific entry points to a number of concealed dimensions: the point of view of the author (his/her ideology and positionality) and the performative (political, cultural, and linguistic) nature of a text.

Returning to the exploration of Juárez, I believe that criticisms of textual representations of the city and feminicide always function on a very simplistic binary: These texts either represent or misrepresent Juárez. In practical and performative terms, however, the relationship between audience and text is much more complicated and nuanced. As I mentioned earlier, Doležel (1998) asserts, "incompleteness is a universal extensional property of the fictional-world structuring" (p. 169). As sites of production of human meaning, literary texts are constructed on natural absences and voids. Thus, a text that can fully map the entirety of such a complicated space as Juárez is an epistemological impossibility. In spite of this fact, any fictional text, in one way or another, contains some *truth* in it. Thereby, fictional spaces can serve as entry points to

real world objects. In more systematic terms, "fictional texts vary the number, the extent and the functions of the gaps by varying the distribution of zero texture" (p. 170). Doležel understands the concept of "zero texture" as the absence of a fictional fact (lack of texture/writing) and the presence of these world-truths give each text a particular performativity. For instance, realist and postmodernist texts are differentiated based on the amount of texture that is available to the reader, a process that Doležel describes as *saturation*. Thus, a saturated text is more "complete" (more "real," in fictional-world terms) than a less saturated fiction. Using Wolfgang Iser's theory of reception, Doležel concludes that the reader fills the gaps and absences of the text, constructing "the fictional world guided by his or her life experience, that is, by his or her communion with complete objects and worlds" (p. 171). This fluid understanding between reader and text opens important lines of inquiry in literary representations of Juárez; hypothetical readers of these novels may or may not be familiar with the details of the murders or the complex situation of the U.S.-Mexico border and yet, in whatever possible scenario, the probable reader expects the author to have some degree of "expertise" on the facts surrounding the cases. This fact proves paradoxical if we consider the fictional performativity of these novels: facts and names can be altered or substituted, some details can be hidden or placed in the center of the narratives; the unresolved nature of the cases leaves space for speculation. Thus, instead of focusing on the possibility or impossibility of representing Juárez, *we need to envision these texts as mediated entry points to a concrete reality*. A reality that will remain incomplete, but whose gaps and omissions reveal the author's positionality, subjectivity, and ideology.

The relationship between the fictional and nonfictional dimensions of "Crimes" and *Huesos en el desierto* serve as perfect examples of the contradictory nature of fictionality. At the same time, the possible worlds theory and the incomplete

performativity of literature are useful in the context of our analysis because it allows a more nuanced contextualization of "Crimes" and *Huesos en el desierto* and their respective authors. These texts provide as interconnected worlds in a single continuum that transgress different conceptual boundaries and discourses (a move between two performative spaces, a fictional and a nonfictional world). Indeed, the challenge of deciphering the fictional space of Santa Teresa, doubly coded as Juárez, comes down to the fact that the veil of its constructed space is almost transparent, but mediated nonetheless. In order to delve into these subjects, I explain and analyze the fascinating story behind the production of these two texts, an aspect that remains absent in recent analyses of *2666*.

CONSTRUCTING THE ANTI-NOVEL: THE ENCOUNTER OF SERGIO GONZÁLEZ RODRÍGUEZ AND ROBERTO BOLAÑO

> I don't remember now what year it was when I began to correspond with Sergio González Rodríguez. Out just now is his book *Huesos en el desierto* ["Bones in the desert"]… a book that delves directly into the horror… [The book] breaks the rules of journalism as soon as it gets the chance in order to venture into the anti-novel, into first-person narrative, into open wounds, and even, in the last part, into lament... It's a book not in the adventure tradition but in the apocalyptic tradition, which are the only two traditions still alive in our continent, maybe because they're the only ones that draw us closer to the abyss that surrounds us.
>
> (Bolaño, 2011, pp. 230-231)

The above quotation comes from Bolaño's piece "Sergio González Rodríguez in the eye of the storm", published at the end of November, 2002, in the Chilean Newspaper *Las Últimas Noticias*. The brief text recounts the only face-to-face meeting that Bolaño had with González Rodríguez before the death of the former a few months later in 2003.

Bolaño (2011) describes the encounter in a candid fashion, pointing out "the conversation was about lighter things" (p. 231), mainly about their nostalgic memories of Mexico City in the 1970s. After reading the entirety of the column, two things caught my attention. First, the fact that Bolaño names Ciudad Juárez, but then describes it as "a city on the U.S. border" (p. 230) (Why not the U.S.-Mexico border? Why the specificity of naming the city and later describe it in vague geopolitical terms?). Second, his labeling of *Huesos en el desierto* as an "anti-novel" and as part of a Latin American "apocalyptic tradition" (p. 231), which effectively places the book in an hemispheric context. Implying that González Rodríguez's account of the feminicides somehow veers into narrative territory is an unnerving and provocative statement. Indeed, *Huesos en el desierto* exhibits and even transcends the notion of anti-novel: its status as a journalistic investigation and its failure to follow the structures of fiction. Still, it also transgresses the rules of journalism. Each chapter jumps back in forth in the chronology of the cases and González Rodríguez sometimes uses a lyrical and subjective tone; other times he delves into a cold and detached reconstruction of the cases. The articles shift into sociological analysis, philosophy, and cultural studies. And yet, Bolaño's label of anti-novel suggests another layer of meaning: *Huesos* is an anti-novel because the extreme nature of the murders transcends any imagined or fictional dimension. If *Huesos* is part of the "apocalyptic" tradition of "our continent" (an ironic and, perhaps, playful statement considering that the meeting with González Rodríguez happened in Europe), then it is not a stretch to think that Bolaño considered *2666* as the endpoint of that legacy. A singular narrative of millennial violence of multiple worlds that transcends the constructed limits of fiction.

Bolaño's piece about *Huesos* and his encounter with González Rodríguez remains one of the few instances in which Bolaño addressed the influence that the Mexican journalist had on his personal research. Further, contacting and publically recognizing the

role of González Rodríguez solved a number of political and practical problems. Due to his deteriorating health in the late 90s, Bolaño never managed to visit Juárez in his entire lifetime and his obsessive-compulsive amassing of information on the murders was limited to journalistic articles. Thus, González Rodríguez represented a grounded focal point to the realities of Juárez. Based on these assumptions, how can we properly assess the role that each author played in their respective projects? The evidence is minimal, but enough traces exist to allow for speculation.

In her engrossing and effective article "Alone Among the Ghosts," Marcela Valdes (2009) uses the murders in Juárez to reconstruct the parallel stories of Bolaño (the daunting process of developing *2666*) and González Rodríguez (the accounts of the murders up to the publication of *Huesos en el desierto* in Barcelona, Spain*)*. Ultimately, the two writers and the two books conflated in their meeting in Blanes (a small municipality of Girona, Spain) in 2012. Just like the work of the two authors, Valdes's article traverses different genres simultaneously operating as a literary essay, a journalistic account, and a personal reading of *2666*. In spite of all these elements, Valdes never loses her focal point: she narrativizes the fateful encounter through the perspective of González Rodríguez, who tells the whole story from a first person perspective and provides extensive details of his correspondence with the Chilean writer.

For instance, and contradicting some of Bolaño's statements in his column, González Rodríguez claims they discussed the murders at length for several hours when the journalist visited Bolaño's home in Blanes (the journalist was in Spain for his presentation of *Huesos en el desierto*). During the meeting, which lasted several hours, Bolaño revealed his intentions of including a fictional version[11] of González Rodríguez in

[11] Bolaño claims that he plagiarised the idea of using a real writer as the basis of a character from Javier Marías's *La negra espalda del tiempo* (1998). In this novel, a fictionalized version of Bolaño appears in the story.

2666. Rodríguez recounts his reaction to Valdes in the following way, "Listen, Bolaño joked, I'm going to make you a character in my novel… González Rodríguez felt his stomach sink. Really, Roberto? He said. With my name?" (Valdes, 2009, p. 35). Until this point, just a few months before his death, Bolaño kept the details of *2666* in secrecy. Even if we consider the inclusion of Rodríguez as one of the characters in "Crimes" as an afterthought, it is difficult to deny the fact that Rodríguez's knowledge and assistance heavily shaped Bolaño's last draft of *2666* and, in particular, of "The Part of the Crimes." More importantly, it is a well-known fact that Bolaño was obsessed with the cases "long before the murders became a cause célèbre" (Valdes, 2009, p. 11). In a 1995 interview, Bolaño claimed he was working on a novel titled *The Woes of the True Policeman*, "Set in northern Mexico, in a town called Santa Teresa… The manuscript had already topped 'eight hundred thousand pages,' he boasted; it was 'a demented tangle that surely no one will understand" (quoted in Valdes, 2009, p. 12). *The Woes of the True Policeman* would eventually be published posthumously in January 2011, as a single novel. This means that, at some point, the massive project of this novel became two different texts.

Notably, the main gap in the extensive narrative provided by Valdes is whether or not the collaboration between González Rodríguez and Bolaño remained one-sided. Although the latter was able to read the manuscript of *Huesos* (and likely provided extensive comments and suggestions), we can conclude that González Rodríguez never had access to the early versions of *2666*. In this sense, González Rodríguez's role as a technical advisor (as Bolaño himself stated it in his column) was fundamental to challenge many of the assumptions that Bolaño had at the time of writing the draft of "Crimes." Indeed, two aspects of González Rodríguez' conclusions about the murders baffled Bolaño. First, the failure of legendary ex-FBI agent Robert K. Ressler in solving the crimes; González Rodríguez asserts that, "[Bolaño] wanted to believe that there was a

rational power that could conquer the criminal" (Valdes, 2009, p. 31). Some readers would find baffling how Bolaño obviates the problematic implications of the U.S. policing of the murders. However, this impasse remains consistent in the context of his life and career. In many instances, Bolaño's body of work was characterized by the presence of a "triumphant ratiocinator" (p. 31): from the infrarealist poets transformation into investigators in *The Savage Detectives*, to a Chilean detective finding the whereabouts of Carlos Wieder, a poet and serial killer, in *Distant Star* (2004); Bolaño always exhibited a fixation with Western post-Enlightment rationality. In many ways, this motif gets dismantled in *2666* and "Crimes" indicating the crisis (epistemological, ideological, and personal) of an intricate literary project.

The second issue that shattered Bolaño's speculations was the possibility (according to the journalist) of two serial killers, a fact that altered the foundations of "Crimes." González Rodríguez points out, "This revelation… disconcerted Bolaño. By then, the writer had already devised an elaborate, ingenious structure for his novel, a structure that in some ways depends on the idea of a single serial killer" (Valdes, 2009, p. 32). In order to solve this practical and factual contradiction, Valdes hypothesizes that Bolaño decided, "to dramatize these theories in his own way… Names are changed, nationalities transformed, characters invented, entire plots embroidered out of imagination, style and air… he refashioned it all to suit his own ends" (p. 33). Considering the effectiveness of Valdes's account, this reading feels rather superficial. What are the implications of Bolaño's fictional reconfiguration of the cases? What were the ultimate goals of Bolaño? According to Doležel (1998), "possible worlds semantics insists that the world is constructed by its authors and the reader's role is to reconstruct it" (p. 21). Under this logic, Bolaño's ingenious fictional reconfiguration gives the readers every knowable fact about the murders without their knowledge. Only one aspect

hints at this ludic transgression of the boundaries of nonfiction: González Rodríguez as a fictional main character in "The Part of the Crimes." Indeed, the presence of the Mexican journalist is the only transparent (that is, direct) reference to the cases. Despite the brilliant reconstruction of this connection, Valdes's only hints at the, probable, political motivation behind Bolaño's inclusion of a fictionalized version of González Rodríguez. Directly referencing the journalist was a controversial and risky move because, at one point in 1999, González Rodríguez was the victim of a brutal physical assault and psychological intimidation due to his published articles in *Reforma*, one of the most widely circulated newspapers in Mexico, denouncing the murders.

González Rodríguez (2006) recounts the assault and continuous threats to his life in the haunting epilogue of *Huesos en el desierto*, which serves to heighten the paranoid and dark environment of the book. Before the attack, González Rodríguez explained how his cellphone service was plagued with weird noises and signal failures. Then, the worst occurred, "That day I was pummeled and assaulted in a taxi, which I took one night in the *Colonia Condesa* in Mexico City. During the drive to my home address, the taxi came to a halt. In an instant, two armed individuals got closer" (González Rodríguez, 2006, p. 274)[12]. The journalist was subjected to physical (repeatedly punched in his body, stabbed in the legs with an ice pick) and verbal abuse (threatened with rape and death). However, he was left alive, indicating that the attack was, perhaps, organized by the political mafia of Juárez as a warning for him to stop the investigation of the murders.

Several weeks after the incident, González Rodríguez entered a zombie-like state: he experienced difficulties talking, had recurrent insomnia, and physical and mental exhaustion. It was not until he awoke in a hospital bed that doctors realized the journalist

[12] "Aquel día fui golpeado y asaltado en un taxi, que abordé una noche en la Colonia Condesa de la Ciudad de México. En el trayecto hacia mi domicilio, el taxi se detuvo de pronto. En un instante, se aproximaron dos sujetos armados" (González Rodróguez, 2006, p. 274).

had a subdural hematoma. This experience is narrated in the first paragraph of the book's epilogue: "I woke up and there were voices and strange lights in my surroundings. It took me a few seconds to find, between the heaviness of my body and the volatility of my senses, a point of reference that would take me back to reality. I wanted to leave immediately. I knew I was in an operating room" (González Rodríguez, 2006, p. 274)[13]. This pivotal moment serves as a fitting example of an underlying motif of the book: througout *Huesos en el desierto,* González Rodríguez continually moves from a fact based narrative and journalistic speculation to lyrical passages filled with oppressive phantasmatic environments, numerous allusions to the borders of reality and dreams, as well as moments of nightmarish violence. After pages and pages of relentless violence, death, and strange conspiracies, the near death experience of the author functions as a mimesis that bridges his corporeal experience and memory with an alien environment. These types of relations that move between the temporal and physical spaces populate the book. For instance, in chapter 2 ("*El mapa difícil*"/"The Difficult Map"), González Rodríguez (2006) describes the weather and topography of Juárez as an in-between space of nature and apocalyptic unnatural technology:

> Ciudad Juárez shows an expansive force that withdraws towards the hills and the mountains under the desert's blue sky…. In winter, the same colors attenuate and merge with the spectral veil of clouds or fog… Some metallic reflection or a burst of color breaks the monotony: the solar power and dust place a crude patina on avenues, the roofs, the glass windows, the zinc overlays and vehicles. (p. 27)[14]

[13] "Desperté y a mi alrededor había voces y luces extrañas. Demoré unos segundos en reencontrar, entre la pesadez de mi cuerpo y la volatilidad de mis sentidos, un punto de referencia que me devolviera a la realidad. Quería irme de allí de inmediato. Supe que estaba en una sala de quirófano" (González Rodríguez, 2006, p. 274).

[14] "Ciudad Juárez muestra una fuerza expansiva que se repliega hacia las lomas y los cerros bajo el cielo azul del desierto… En invierno, los mismos colores se acentúan y se funden con el velo espectral de las nubes o la niebla… Algún reflejo metálico o un color restallante rompe la monotonía: la potencia solar y el polvo tienden una pátina cruda sobre las avenidas, las azoteas, el cristal de las ventanas, las láminas de zinc y los vehículos" (González Rodríguez, 2006, p. 27).

In *Huesos en el desierto*, González Rodríguez constructs Juárez as a space that stands in stark opposition to the optimistic narratives of hybrid identities that celebrate the U.S.-Mexico border as an in-between space of resistance and cultural reconfigurations. As a journalist from Mexico City, González Rodríguez perceives the border in contradictory fashions. For instance, in chapter 3 ("*Cuentos Crueles*"/"Cruel Stories"), he attempts to debunk the fetishistic portrayals of border violence and Northern Mexican culture in American films and books (the corporeal and sexual vampire demons in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, the satanic drug dealers of *Perdita Durango*, the *snuff* film underground industry in *Henry Lee Lucas: The Shocking True Story of America's Most Notorious Serial Killer*). Alongside this passionate defense, however, Rodríguez continually alludes to a quote by Robert K. Ressler who, in his mediatic visit as a consulting investigator (invited by the Mexico's federal government and fictionalized in *2666* as Albert Kessler), described Juárez as "*A twilight zone*…, a crepuscular dimension, unknown" (quoted in González Rodríguez, 2006, p. 14)[7]. This paradoxical position in González Rodríguez's work is clearly the main element that attracted Bolaño, which altered the foundations of *2666*. Indeed, the internal journey of the journalist's investigation mirrors the obsessive quest for knowledge of Bolaño's oeuvre:

> Recalling things past provides the benefits of analogical thought, that is, the aptitude of tracing analogies, associations, bridges in the facts that quotidian life presents at increasing speeds, disjointed, in the middle of news flash chaos and under the risks of generalized amnesia… Historical studies, in general, arise from similar ideas: they summon the fabric of facts and conjectures… There is first the conjecture and later the method; first man and then, science. (González Rodríguez, 2006, p. 282-283)[15]

[15] "Rememorar cosas préteritas otorga los beneficios del pensamiento analógico, es decir, de la aptitud de trazar analogías, asociaciones, puentes en los hechos que la vida cotidiana presenta a gran velocidad, inconexos, en medio del caos noticioso y bajo el riesgo de la amnesia generalizada... Los estudios históricos, en general, parten de ideas semejantes: convocan el tejido de los hechos y las conjeturas... Primero sería la conjetura y después el método; el hombre y después la ciencia" (González Rodríguez, 2006, pp. 282-283).

In essence, this passage reveals González Rodríguez's attempts to *reverse* the common material approaches to the murders. If the usual representations of Juárez and the U.S.-Mexico border (specifically, American and journalistic portrayals of sensationalized violence) moved from geopolitical conditions to essentialized and voyeuristic constructions of savage violence, then *Huesos en el desierto* strived to transcend the nightmarish nature of the murders and reach a clear understanding of the sociopolitical conditions that sanction and produce sexual violence at the periphery of the First and Third Worlds. In other words, to turn the irrational and the unknown into cold facts. However, as we have shown through the chapter, the Mexican journalist undermines his own project at every turn. The gaps and silences of the cases slowly reveal the motifs of horror and the normalization of violence. And shockingly, González Rodríguez clearly projected these unconscious fears and open questions to Bolaño. In that fateful moment when González Rodríguez demolished his obsessive desire for the existence of a "rational power" (the failure of Ressler in solving the crimes and the possibility of several serial killers), the gaps and open structures of González Rodríguez's research were transferred to *2666*. By extension, *Huesos en el desierto* slowly turned into a *literary artifact* and his incomplete (nonfictional) world became the main narrative structure of "Crimes." Thus, Bolaño's use of the term anti-novel perfectly encapsulates the paradox of the book: an author striving to produce an authoritative vision on the murders of women, yet undercut by an apocalyptic narrative that creeps in the gaps and silences of the prose. In a sense, it is a textual world that cannot function neither in fictional or nonfictional terms because it remains connected and separated from an external world: a strange and contradictory text that moves between semiotic spaces.

"THE PART OF THE CRIMES": BODIES, TRAUMA, AND THE UNCANNY

In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Ann Cvetkovich (2003) asserts, "Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all" (p. 7). Through the issue of lesbian invisibility and trauma in historical records, Cvetkovich provides a biting critique of the *limitations of material archives*. The reconstructions of hidden stories of representation and violence, "demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral" (Cvetkovich, 2003 p. 7). Essential and problematic questions arise if we translate the idea of trauma as an ephemeral dimension into the phenomenon of the murders in Ciudad Juárez: the large number of disappeared women; the Mexican police and authorities tampering, manipulating, and losing forensic evidence; the terrifying possibility of bodies buried in the desert of Chihuahua transforming dust into nothingness; the multiple theories and conspiracies of murders. All of these absences speak of an incomplete archive erased or distorted through "official" narratives that legitimize the Mexican Nation-State, that is, the ultra-conservative powers that ruled the Juárez government and which successfully downplayed the murders for over a decade. In a sense, it is not all that different to Gyanendra Pandey's (1997) critique of Indian nationalistic historiographies where, "The violence itself is taken as 'known'. Its contours and character are simply assumed: its forms need no investigation" (p. 1). In other words, violence needs no further comment or critique because it is a universal and unavoidable fact. Thus, the "official" discourse of the Mexican government treated feminicide as an anomaly; a minuscule anomaly, and not a widespread phenomenon of contemporary Mexico.

The failures of official erasures and concealment of violence ultimately collapse in the political immediacy of the worlds portrayed in "The Part of the Crimes" and *Huesos en el desierto*. Bolaño and Rodríguez unearthed the "contours" of violence, the absences of the official narratives, a terrifying discourse of patriarchal and sexual violence as normalized and uneventful. In the empty spaces of erased trauma only the bodies, the names, and the violence inflicted in the flesh of the victims are left (or a complete emptiness, as in the cases of disappeared women and girls). Many reports and investigations crafted by NGO's, civil-rights organization, journalists, "official" sources, and the media contained detailed lists of the number, names, and causes of death of each feminicide. In *Huesos* and "Crimes," the lists are deployed as simultaneous literary and political mechanisms.

In Chapter 18 of *Huesos* ("*La Vida Inconclusa*"/"The Unfinished Life"), González Rodríguez (2006) lists the date when each body was found, then the name (only if it was found or identified), age, physical description, place and cause of death of each victim. The list starts with the most recent victim and works in reverse, cataloguing the bodies until the first "official" feminicide in 1993, "11/03/97, Cinthia Rocío Acosta Alvarado, 10 years old, *Valle Dorado quinta etapa*… asphyxia due to strangling, signs of blows in head, hands, and legs, raped…" (p. 265). The chapter ends with a quote of Marcel Schwob's *The Children's Crusade*, "And you will return the bodies of my boys and my girls… and you will show to the merciful travelers all of these little white bones scattered in the night" (quoted in González Rodríguez, 2006, p. 273). The notion of bodies that cannot be found (since they are "scattered in the night"), bares the simultaneous hypervisivility of death in a space where many bodies remain invisible or, at worst, lost. The disturbing neverending walls of text that chronicle the brutal and ritualistic violence inflicted on women, alongside the lyrical and somber passage of

Schwob, create an atmosphere that Bolaño fittingly described as venturing in "lament" (Bolaño, 2011, p. 231). Why use the word "lament"? The final quote returns the reader to the title of the book: "Bones in the Desert." At a first glance, the title feels sensationalistic or exploitative. After the final page, the "bones" in the desert reveal González Rodríguez's sorrow because death and violence exist in an incommensurable dimension (the desert), but they cannot be devised in physical terms (the bodies of the disappeared women). Based on reconstructed evidence, it is unclear if "*La Vida Inconclusa*" directly influenced the structure of "Crimes." In one way or another, these specific sections of both texts function as clear parallels of one another. And yet, Bolaño's greatest achievement in *2666* consists of the ways that he deploys the records of victims with a very different layer of meaning in his fictional world of Santa Teresa.

Considered the central section/chapter/*novella* of *2666*, "The Part of the Crimes" contains a large and diverse number of subplots and characters: policemen, detectives, a female psychologist, rapists, murder suspects, the presence of a female spiritual medium, politicians, drug dealers, bodyguards, and the local folk of Santa Teresa and across the border in Arizona. During the course of almost 400 pages, in the Spanish language edition (close to 300 hundred in the English translation), the main plot continuously comes to a halt in order to introduce, in a cold, clinical, and detached narration (in a sense, a description that mimics the language and vocabulary of procedural novels or forensic reports), the detailed descriptions of the bodies found in Santa Teresa. Similar to the list in González Rodríguez's *Huesos*, "Crimes" details the name, age, and causes of death with one major difference: Bolaño inverts the chronological linearity of "*La Vida Inconclusa*." Thus, the novel starts in 1993 and ends in 1997 after the narration has catalogued more than a hundred bodies that run parallel to the lives of the strange characters that populate Santa Teresa. In other words, the main plot of the novel and the

descriptions of the bodies exist alongside one another giving "Crimes" a cohesive temporal linearity. At the same time, these narrative lines share three leitmotifs that cut across the entirety of *2666*: a sense of constant repetition (prevalent in style and events occurring in the plot), walls of text, and an atmosphere that heightens a sense of irrationality, horror, and the intangible.

In "Case Closed: Madness and Dissociation in *2666*," Brett Levinson (2009) asserts, "that all violence in 2666 is serial. Each act of brutality is the repetition of other such acts in the text. Serial killing comments upon a certain automaticity or technicity, a kind of beat operating within and over human history, human action, and the human body" (p. 15). In an elaborate game of irony, none of the murders are solved even when an obsessive pattern of repetition crawls in every description of the victims with phrases such as, "the cause of death had been strangulation" (Bolaño, 2009, p. 413); "fracture of hyoid bone" (p. 545); and "the victim had been raped countless times" (p. 460). Ultimately, these patterns coexist with the redundant and contradictory statements of the official investigations, which claimed, over and over again, that, "To all intents and purposes, the case was closed" (p. 390). Because the murders transcend the limits of rationality, all of the repetitive descriptions of violence and the supposed closed nature of the cases instead reveal a sense of disturbing openness. And just like the investigations (and the murders), the narration also enters a cycle of fetishistic repetition that always remains incomplete, vague, and open-ended. Thus, the detached and clinical narration never judges or elucidates the characters's actions. In other words, the morality and ideology of the characters can only exist in the gaps that the reader fills throughout the novel. For instance, the following passage occurs after the sexworkers of a nightclub are temporally incarcerated as suspects of one of the murders:

> The cell must not have been more than ten feet square. In the corridor he saw Epifanio, who was watching what was happening in the other cells with a cigarette between his lips... In the other cells policemen were raping the whores from La Riviera. How's it rolling, Lalito? said Epifanio, going to get in on the action? No, said Lalo Cura, you? Me neither, said Epifanio…What did those whores do? asked Lalo. It looks like they bumped off another girl, said Epifanio. Lalo Cura was quiet. The early morning breeze along the streets of Santa Teresa really was fresh and cool. The scarred moon still shone in the sky. (Bolaño, 2009, p. 401)

This passage provides a notable example of how Bolaño avoids describing sexual violence enacted on female bodies. In fact, most[16] of the violence in "Crimes" (and even the rest of the novel) is continuously relegated to the gaps in the narrative. The readers see the effects of extreme violence, but only after they are enacted on the victims. In this sense, Bolaño uses the incomplete limits of the fictional space to expand the readers' semiotic reception: we are the ones that reconstruct the incomplete world, which, in this case, gives violence a metaphysical dimension. Critics have praised these elaborate techniques that became an inherent feature of Bolaño's work. For instance, in the context of the same passage, the character of Eduardo "Lalo" Cura functions as a play on words ("*La Locura*") that translates in English as "The Insanity." Thus, the passage describes a series of tropes of Latin American crime fiction: the abuse of authority, judicial corruption, and patriarchal forms of violence. The added semantic layer of Lalo Cura's name exhibits a shift in the discourse that moves from familiar sociopolitical representations into spaces of irrationality. Indeed, behind the dark realms of the police precincts, where rape and drugs are hidden in the space of law enforcement, "Lalo

[16] There are only two moments in the novel where the narration provides a detailed description of violent acts. Interestingly enough, both moments involve violence vis-à-vis *men*. The first one occurs when *El Anillo* and *El Guajolote*, two inmates, attempt to rape Klaus Haas (the fictional stand-in of Egyptian suspect, Latiff Sharif) in the jail showers. After other prisoners aid him, Haas proceeds to anally rape *El Anillo* with *El Guajolote*'s knife (p. 484). The second graphic scene takes place in "Crimes" and describes the castration of another inmate (p. 522). Both scenes are filled with homoerotic and Freudian overtones.

Cura/Insanity was quiet." The gradual morphing of the discourse becomes a motif that merges several sections of the novel: the presence of an African-American journalist who uses the pseudonym of "Fate" (the main character of "The Part of Oscar Fate") and the existence of a strange landfill known as "*El Chile*", which Cathy Fourez (2006) describes, as a "polisemic term that derivates several pejorative connotations" (p. 23), including the word "*chile*" as a colloquial form of referring to the penis and, perhaps, as an elaborate reference to the dictatorship of Chile. However, focusing on the semantic nature and self-referentiality of *2666*'s narration fails to grasp the complex performative mechanisms that spread throughout the narrative.

Bolaño exhibits the ways that rational language and even scientific discourse devolves into strange systems of nothingness. These ideas are not a simple matter of style or point of view, but techniques ingrained in the themes and structures of the novel. Stripped from post-Boom aesthetics and a more formalistic literary realism, Bolaño continuously breaks the narrative rhythm of the story to delve into bizarre tangents; characters engage in extensive monologues where logic degenerates into intangible spaces, and plot threads never fully conclude or close. An excellent example of these techniques takes place at the beginning of "Crimes." While the number of feminicides increase and the bodies display increasing forms of violence, the policeman Juan de Dios Martínez is assigned to a strange case: several churches in the city report seeing a man who, after sobbing uncontrollably inside the church, urinates on the floor and hastily escapes before getting caught. Just like a serial killer, the man's modus operandi evolves and becomes more sophisticated and violent: he enters the churches at night, destroys the statues and figurines inside, and then defecates inside the holy space. Baffled by the actions of the culprit, Martínez arranges an interview with Elvira Campos, the director of a mental asylum in Santa Teresa, with whom he develops a sexual relationship. Campos

asserts that the criminal suffers from sacrophobia, "fear or hatred of the sacred, of sacred objects, especially from your own religion" (Bolaño, 2009, p. 380). After a substantial conversation, Campos begins defining different kinds of phobias. She starts with common ones, such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia, but, little by little, the definitions become more abstract and self-referential:

> But the worst phobias, in my opinion, are pantophobia, which is fear of everything, and phobophobia, fear of fear itself. If you had to suffer from one of the two, which would you choose? Phobophobia, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Think carefully, it has its drawbacks, said the director… if you're afraid of your own fears, you're forced to live in constant contemplation of them, and if they materialize, what you have is a system that feeds on itself, a vicious cycle, said the director. (p. 383)

The passage encapsulates this compulsion in the novel to shift from concrete rational concepts to intricate ontological abstractions. Campos's conceptualization of fear as a "cycle," a meta-system that inverts itself, reveals a radical sense of the *uncanny*. At one point in Freud's (1955) famed genealogy of the uncanny, the psychologist proposed that in some scenarios a "compulsion to repeat" (p. 238) produces a sense of the uncanny where, "The factor of repetition of the same thing… recalls the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream-states" (p. 237). Referring to the sense of dread experienced when we return to the same object or location (for example, when we are lost in a particular space, unconsciously returning to the same spot over and over again), the uncaniness of repetition strips the self of its artificial borders. In a lyrical sense, the gaze of the subject turns against itself leading to a radical sense of the intangible. Bolaño uses these tangents and repetitions in different forms in all the sections, but the sense of the uncanny in "Crimes" emerges from the collapse of intangible atmospheres into death and violence.

In another passage, a group of policemen tell sexist jokes during breakfast. The initial jokes are simply sexist and patriarchal, "what's the definition of a woman? Silence. And the answer: *pues* a vagina surrounded by a more or less organized bunch of cells… why is the Statue of Liberty a woman? Because they needed an empty head for the observation deck" (Bolaño, 2009, p. 552). Soon, the jokes told by one of the policemen (Officer González) veer into misogyny and disturbing implications of violence, "how long does it take a woman to die who's been shot in the head? *Pues* seven or eight hours, depending on how long it takes the bullet to find the brain" (p. 552). The scene opens the discourse of phallocentric violence and patriarchal performativity: it slowly evolves from stereotypes of gender binaries (women as prone to emotion, men as representatives of reason, and so on) to a normalization of violence along gender lines, where discourses of biological or sexual differences devolve into misogynistic hierarches of power (the men as inherently superior to women).

And yet, the narration, again, slips into a self-referential monologue on language, God and utterance: "much of God's truth lay hidden in ordinary jokes… who *glimpsed* his words, the words the inspector meant to utter… Who the fuck comes up with jokes? asked the inspector… Who's the first to tell them?" (Bolaño, 2009, p. 553). This move from the concrete to a metaphysical digression on the origins of language itself demonstrates the death of the classical myth where "the senselessness of human actions and historical conflicts, the daily encounters with the bizarre, cannot be explained and redeemed by recourse to divine or demonic forces" (Doležel, 1998, p. 198). Doležel calls this moment the *modern myth* because it inaugurates the inability of the fictional space to solve the incommensurable nature of violence. In this nihilistic dead end, language, utterances, and the divine are reduced to a never-ending cycle of nothingness (the linguistic utterance deflecting and collapsing upon itself).

Still, the passage continues. After this sequence, Lalo Cura retells the history of his family in the outskirts of the city revealing that all of the women in his family suffered rape and abandonment; each ancestor a product of sexual violence that extends back to the late nineteenth century: "He heard or remembered voices talking to him about the first Expósito, the family tree dating back to 1865, the nameless orphan, fifteen years old, raped by a Belgian soldier in a one-room adobe house outside Villaviciosa" (Bolaño, 2009, pp. 554-555). This familial genealogy of rape extends for four pages and it marks the end of Bolaño's textual move structured in three parts: 1) a shift from gender discourse to sexual violence; 2) a collapse of the classical literary myth to the inauguration of the modern myth; and 3) a return to a Latin American legacy of colonial and sexual violence. In many ways, this passage exemplifies the transgressive fictional spaces of *2666* and "Crimes," which are structured in these elaborate and, at times, impenetrable tangents of cyclical violence. Thus, the cycle of abstract fear and horror repeats once more.

Delving into the issue of discourse and textual performativity in "Crimes" and *2666* as a whole, resolves the contradictions of recent scholarship about Bolaño. Academic research on *2666* is rich and diverse in theoretical approaches, from pharmacological frameworks (Hermann Hellinghaus, 2011) to neo-Marxist traditions (Grant Farred, 2010) and postmodern or postcolonial critiques of capital (Sharae Deckard, 2012; Correa and Astudillo, 2009). And yet, at the textual level most of these analysis are similar and seemingly reducible to a theoretical dichotomy that rests on the apparent political contradiction of Bolaño's literary project: the first approach constructs *2666* as a clear critique of millennial capitalism revealing the effects of commodification and sexual violence at the periphery of the modern world, that is, how the modern crisis and neocolonial forces predetermine the axis of domination in North-South relationships.

The second dimension of these approaches focuses or fixates on an aesthetic of horror in Bolaño's most revered novels, which in psychobiograhical terms serves as a clear explanation of his lifetime obsessions with a continuum of normalized violence that spreads in Western civilization and, in particular, through the issue of the "banality" of violence in World War II and Nazi Germany. The ideological contradiction is obvious: taken as a single novel or individual work, "Crimes" refashions border literature into a disturbing account of sexual violence and the effects postmodern capitalist machinaries (the *maquila* industry and the commodification of bodies) have in the global South. Latin American *testimonio*, detective fiction, border aesthetics and phallocentric violence collapse in a single nightmarish narrative. Nevertheless, this type of reading cannot be detached from the larger context of the sections like "The Part of Archimboldi," where the normalization of brutality in World War II and the Holocaust is magnified as the inherent psychobiographical core of the 20th century. Indeed, it is almost impossible to disassociate the two discourses when the narrative itself places the phenomenon of feminicide in the continuum of horror in human history, or, in more succinct terms, "No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them" (Bolaño, 2009, p. 348). In many ways, the clear disarticulation of these two readings evidences the unavoidable fact that *2666* exemplifies a legacy of Latin American literary traditions. I use the label Latin American in the sense that Bolaño epitomizes the internalized masochistic relationship of the writer from the South: the critiques of a European colonialist legacy alongside the need to produce narratives that place localized realities into universalist (i.e. Eurocentric) visions of violence. I do not wish to imply that Bolaño wished to capitalize or sensationalize the effects of sexual violence in Juárez. In one way or another, *2666* represents the most nuanced and successful fictionalization of border violence. "Crimes" effectively portrays the disturbing ramifications of the murders

because his structure is infused with relevant sociopolitical implications: that we accept the deaths of hundreds of women as an anomaly and not as an all-encompassing phenomenon of our modern culture. Thus, my criticism is directed, rather, at the analyses of the novel that unconsciously codify *2666* as a text with a contradictory performative nature.

At the end of "The Part of Amalfitano," the main character, a Chilean literature professor exiled in Santa Teresa, experiences a strange dream in which he holds a brief conversation with Communist philosopher, Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin gives Amalfitano an equation that is meant to solve the question of the irrational nature of history (metaphorized as "the third leg of the human table" [Bolaño, 2009, p. 227]), "This is the equation: supply + demand + magic. And what is magic? Magic is epic and it's also sex and Dionysian myths and play" (p. 228). Alexis Cáceres (2010) interprets this dialog as the ways that Bolaño "considers magic as those fascinating elements that break the consumerist logic of contemporary societies" (p. 45). This reading accurately merges neo-Marxist comment with the ideological and symbolic function of Yeltsin's apparition, as well as foreshadowing the long tangent on misogynistic humor that appears in "Crimes" (outlined a few paragraphs above). Still, the symbolic dimension of the dialog opens some interesting issues. In its structural sense, magic[17] is an illusion, but it also involves imagination and pleasure. In Nietzchean terms, the Dionysian seeks chaotic pleasure and the reaffirmation of life. Thus, if magic = epic, then the epic is life, chaos, pleasure, humor, and *transgression*. If we go so far as to consider *2666* as an epic

[17] I decided to follow this line of analysis in order to avoid falling into the traps of discussing "magic" in *2666* in terms of Latin American "magical realism". At this point in time, discussing Bolaño's oeuvre within the historical context of a post-Latin American Boom (or post-Boom) feels like a pointless endeavor that should be limited to discussions in English literature courses. By contrast, *2666* feels completely embedded in notions of hyperrealism and evidences Bolaño's achievement in crafting a cohesive and multi-layered body of work.

narrative, then the entire project of Bolaño involves, in equal terms, as much a celebration and condemnation of the creative act where the impulses of the fictional worlds explode in provocative, chaotic and unrestrained cycles of the unreal-real.

The disconnect that exists in existent scholarship on *2666*, between the ideological critique and the aesthetics of horror, may originate in the fact that Bolaño's fictionalizing of people, locations, and victims (Santa Teresa as Ciudad Juárez) was interpreted as a practical solution to avoid possible condemnation for profiting on the morbid nature of the murders–sort of an ethical impasse. In other words, *2666* became an independent self-contained fictional space with allusions and references to the cases, but not as a direct representation of Juárez. I believe this interpretation misses the point because it obviates Bolaño's transgressive Dionysian joke. Throughout his career and all of his novels, Bolaño crafted fictional worlds that simultaneously attracted and resisted postmodern approaches. Indeed, his approach to fiction involved a great deal of ludic exercises, which could be coded as mischievous or provocative: empty cultural references, aimless subplots, and symbolism that may or may not mean anything. This playful and rebellious approach to creation was reflected in Bolaño's public persona: a resistance to accept interviews and the exercising of an antagonistic attitude to certain forms of literature and certain kinds of writers and literary critics. But these eccentric features also abscond a deep and passionate political commitment to arts, revolution, and ideology. On that account, Bolaño's hyper-fictionalized space of Santa Teresa is deeply grounded in the political and sociological realities of Mexico and Juárez. The bridge of both worlds (the fictional and non fictional spaces) is, of course, located with Sergio González Rodríguez. Thus, "Crimes" and *Huesos en el desierto* go beyond a straightforward connection: in reading "Crimes" the reader also (re)codes *Huesos*. At the

center, the body of González Rodríguez's book and experience serve as *the archive of political trauma*.

The search for truth and the personal journey that González Rodríguez undergoes in the gaps and absences of *Huesos* is contained and chronicled through the fictional González Rodríguez in "Crimes." From indignation to political action, the fictional-nonfictional story of Rodríguez builds to a crescendo that culminates with the encounter of Azucena Esquivel Plata, a PRI congresswoman. Intelligent, beautiful, and a controversial political figure in the novel, Esquival retells her life story to the fictional Rodríguez and her unprecedented success in the *macho* dominated space of Mexican politics. Esquival decides to meet the journalist after an endless search for justice. With the help of a private detective (Luis Miguel Loya, who ends in a mental asylum after the investigation), Esquival reconstructs the mystery behind the disappearance of her childhood friend, Kelly Rivera Parker. Kelly vanished after she starts organizing private parties: in essence, convincing or hiring young girls and prostitutes to party at ranches owned by powerful drug dealers (colloquially known as *narcoranchos*)[18]. Even in the absence of justice, Esquival still believes in the possibilities of bringing the facts to a public spotlight. She only asks one favor to the journalist:

> What is it I want you to do? asked the congresswoman. I want you to write about this, keep writing about this. I've read your articles. They're good, but too often you pull your punches. I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unassailable flesh, not shadows. I want you to go to Santa Teresa and sniff around. I want you to sink in your teeth… Now I want you to use everything that Loya and I gathered between us and stir up the hive. Naturally, you won't be alone. I'll be with you always, though you can't see me, helping you every step of the way. (Bolaño, 2009, pp. 631-632)

[18] Gradually, the parties degenerated into hellish events where guests, "went out naked, maybe one or two covered their private parts, wore a thong or leopard- or tiger-print briefs, braving the cold, which was intense at four in the morning, singing and laughing, from one caper to the next, like Satan's helpers" (Bolaño, 2009, p. 628).

The metaphorical parallel that Esquival creates between journalistic work and a cannibalistic or animal-like discourse ("strike human flesh", "sink in your teeth", and so on) operates on two levels. First a gender dimension, where González Rodríguez encounters the puzzles of an unfinished picture. Or perhaps a more fitting description would be that he stumbles upon the pieces, at every turn elucidated and collected by women: workers, mothers, a prostitute, and one congresswomen from, ironically, the infamous political party that ruled Mexico for 70 years (the PRI or *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*). An appropriate resolution, since only women could understand the terrifying journey of the female victims and, in the context of the narrative, they are the only ones who can reconstruct the evidence. Besides this political and gender implications, a second dimension is at play here since Esquival's use of "flesh-eating" references and savage discourses are juxtaposed to her symbolic placing in the hierarchies of power. If the bodies of hundreds of women in "Crimes" can be understood as a metaphor of a dismembered nation, then a women taking the symbolic torch of that violent past elucidates a vague and unpredictable future for Mexico (can she change the structures of power? Or is she reproducing the old sexist oligarchies?) In the end, the linear chronology of "Crimes" appears to the reader as an open conclusion that leads directly to the beginning of *Huesos en el desierto*. The fictional and nonfictional worlds merged in a single continuum of political ramifications that continue to this day. The words of Esquival are haunting, "You published a so-called political novel in which all you do is toss around unfounded accusations, and nothing happened to you, did it?" (Bolaño, 2009, pp. 631-632). The cycle and the story repeat once more through a gendered matrix.

TESTING THE LIMITS OF FICTIONAL WORLDS

Before concluding this chapter, several questions remain unresolved: how can we understand or encode *2666* and "The Part of the Crimes? Is it a postmodern novel? An expansive fictional world centered on the rewriting of *Huesos en el desierto*? Or is it something entirely different? Let us take the line of postmodernist writing for a second. In his possible worlds theory of fiction, Doležel (1998) developed a typology of postmodern rewritings of canonical texts: *transposition* (relocating the temporal and geographical setting of the original world), *expansion* (expanding or complementing the previous text), and *displacement* (where the new text alters or modifies the existent fictional world). Applying this typology to *2666* reveals the, at times, rigid instrumentality of Doležel's theory. In many ways, "Crimes" and *2666* traverses these three types of rewriting: It relocates the murders, but it maintains the same geopolitical context (the U.S.-Mexico border); it expands the gaps and narrative absences permeating *Huesos*; and it modifies the facts of the cases, while existing in the same timeline (occurring before the writing of *Huesos)*. At the same time, it is a disservice to call the novel a postmodern work of fiction since it simultaneously articulates itself as the culmination of Bolaño's work, an expansion-rewriting of a nonfictional world; the endnote to the classical myth and the inauguration of modernity as the space of horror (the abstract incommensurability of violence); and as an open fictional world written from the margins of nonfiction. The effectiveness of the work rests in the fact that *2666* functions as any of these things and neither. It is fiction in its purest state because it exhausts and takes advantage of all the limitations of the fictional space: incomplete, independent from the outside world, and yet, dependent of the facts of the world in order to render the horror of its truth.

Using the theory of possible worlds allows to dismantle the continuous shifting of discourses across the different textual spaces (Ciudad Juárez and Santa Teresa), while maintaining a focal point that constructs them as separate through their formalistic qualities and contrasting ideological foundations. If Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* exposes how essentialized understandings of violence exist at the margins of textuality, then Bolaño's *2666* stands as a crucial example of the extreme forms in which feminicide can be reencoded within an aesthetic project. For better or worse, Bolaño's successful blurring of the limits between fiction and nonfiction detached the sociopolitical conditions of Ciudad Juárez from the overarching violence. The fact that every literary analysis of *2666* deals with the feminicides in tangential terms provides ample evidence of the overwhelming performative power of fiction. At the end, the universalized space of Santa Teresa was imposed over the localized dimensions of Ciudad Juárez. In other words, the fictional world won the battle of representation.

Chapter 2

Chicana Representations of Juárez in *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez*

In the previous chapter, I used the theory of possible worlds to analyze how *2666* and *Huesos en el desierto* offer a complex ground for expanding our understanding of the construction of fictional worlds, as well as their transgressive possibilities in rearticulating the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. In this chapter, I move to novels set in Juárez, written in the English language, and constructed from the perspective of Chicana authors. Because of the murders' geopolitical location on the U.S.-Mexico border and its deep connections to larger frameworks of gender oppression and transborder capital, Juárez has remained an important subject of discussion and revision for Chicana feminists and scholars. At the same time, the Chicana cultural reencodings of Juárez have received limited attention in academic research outside of literary criticism[19]. More importantly, the existent literature that deals with Chicana representations of Juárez tends to focus on specific critiques of the Mexican Nation-State, heteropatriarchal modes of oppression, the ways in which neoliberalism serves to recolonize the border, and how Chicanas are performing important political work in these novels. In this sense, we need to expand our analyses to address how these fictional and artistic representations fit in the larger epistemological frameworks of Chicano/a border theory, U.S. Third World feminism[20], and structures of power and opression.

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[19] For further reference, see Claudia Sadowski-Smith (2009), Lazaro Lima (2007), López-Lozano (2010), Irene Mata (2010), Rachel Tillotson (2006), and Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010). Most of this scholarship centers on *Desert Blood*. The *only* exception is Sadowski-Smith, which also briefly analyses *If I Die in Juárez* and Gregory Nava's *Bordertown*.

[20] Also known as postcolonial feminism, U.S. Third World feminism was developed by feminist of color as a theoretical response to the ethnocentric and Western-infused frameworks of white feminists in developed countries. Some of the authors usually included in this school of thought are Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Trinh-Minh Ha, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, amongst others. I use the less-common

This chapter centers on two works of contemporary Chicana fiction: Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* and Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die I Juárez*. Although both Gaspar de Alba and Duarte are influential Chicana scholars and writers, the novels are widely different in tone and genre. *Desert Blood* is a semi-autobiographical crime fiction novel set in both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border (El Paso and Cd. Juárez). *If I Die in Juárez*, on the other hand, is a coming-of-age drama that centers on the experiences of three Mexican girls and their encounters with misogynistic and patriarchal violence. The former is a detective story that articulates a *queer (*re)reading of the hard-boiled fiction and the role that the U.S. plays in producing the conditions that legitimate sexual violence; the latter is a racial recoding of gender and Indigenous frameworks of female resistance to colonization and patriarchal oppression.

Through literary, postcolonial, and feminist criticism, that serves as ideological and subjective frameworks, these authors mediate the fictionalization of Juárez. In what ways does Chicana feminism reconfigure the material aspects of feminicide in Juárez? The question is not presupposed to critique the reasoning behind writing these novels (literature as political activism), but rather on the implicit challenges of translating particular epistemological frameworks to different geopolitical spaces, even when this translation occurs in liminal and permeable spaces such as the US-Mexico border. Liz Kelly (1987) argues that sexual violence exists in a singular continuum that affects most women's lives, "whilst the form it takes, how women define events and its impact on them at the time and over time varies" (p. 49). We could expand this argument through Elizabeth Grosz's (1994) theory of corporeal feminism, which envisions the bodily experience as a Möbius strip, "Tracing the outside of the strip leads one directly to its

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term of U.S. Third World feminism, because it exposes the fact that many of these authors grew and developed their theories in universities in the United States.

inside without at any point leaving its surface (…) the outer becoming the inner side" (p. 117). These novels and their authors conceive the external and internal experience and perception of women's bodies on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border as continuous extensions of their identity, which is constructed through an oppressive racial and gender continuum of hegemonic sexual violence prevalent in the history of the Borderlands. Thus, these novels attempt to bridge the subjugation of subaltern women by means of a universal understanding of physical and symbolic violence. However, labor, sexual violence, internalized and external colonization intersect and are contradictory in Chicana fictional representations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in a number of paradoxical ways. Thus, I placed these incongruous discourses under the umbrella of *neocolonialism*. In contrast to *colonialism* (the historical practices of conquest enacted by Europe and the United States) and *postcolonialism* (the intellectual and interdisciplinary tradition that critiques colonialism), *neocolonialism* comprises the racist and sexist discourses that the legacies of colonization ingrained in the social matrix and which we continue to reproduce in our daily lives.

Consequently, I center my analysis of *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* on these paradoxes and ideological challenges, which problematize, or challenge, the transnational legacies of third world feminism and Chicana border theories. Now, I do understand that using these overly broad categories in this manner may pose a series of difficulties. In this sense, the foundation of this chapter presupposes that the ideological foundations of these novels and authors parallel Chela Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness as an answer to dominant colonialist discourses reproduced in hegemonic white feminism and cultural studies. Sandoval (1991) asserts, "U.S. third world feminism represents a new condition of possibility, another kind of gender, race and class consciousness which has allowed us to recognize and define differential consciousness" (p. 16). In this sense,

feminisms enacted by women and *queer* women of color function with an oppositional stance in the margins of theory and self-being that resists the patriarchal, racist, and homophobic structures of the Nation-State. That said, while these theories remain as contentious frameworks in current academia, both *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* conceptualize Juárez in systems of difference "through hierarchy, location, and value – enacting the recovery, revenge, or reparation; its processes produce justice" (Sandoval, 1991, p. 14). Whether these novels and authors achieve this project, or, in fact, they also reproduce the systems of oppression and neocolonialism that they wish to eradicate, is the central question of this chapter. Finally, I offer some conclusions regarding the possibilities and impossibilities of a transnational or hemispheric Chicana consciousness. Thus, I hope that my line of inquiry will foster a much larger and broader debate about minority subjects writing about the lives of minority subjects that are not their own.

DESERT BLOOD: *QUEER* PATRIARCHY, COLONIALIST DETECTIVES AND CHICANA SELF-HEALING

Alicia Gaspar de Alba was one of the first Chicana scholars to increase awareness about the crimes occurring at the Juárez-El Paso border. Her efforts would eventually lead to the organizing of the first bi-national conference on the Juárez feminicides ("The *Maquiladora* Murders Or, Who Is Killing the Women of Juárez") in 2003. Co-sponsored by Amnesty International and the Chicano Studies Research Center of UCLA, the conference became a key milestone in strengthening transnational coalitions between scholars, activists, and artists at the time. Two years later, Gaspar de Alba published the first fictional account of the murders in the English language, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*. With a solid background as a feminist scholar, a respected career as a novelist, a transnational experience as a *queer* Mexican American woman of color, and a personal

attachment to the Borderlands (as an El Paso native), Gaspar de Alba was the perfect candidate for writing a nuanced and detailed portrait of the brutal violence occurring Juárez. At the same time, the sum of these characteristics predicted the possibility of the novel having a large autobiographical component. Thus, in one way or another, regardless of reception, quality, impact or financial success, *Desert Blood* became one of the most discussed novels on the murders and a referent in border literature even after nine years of its initial publication.

In many ways, the particular historical context demanded the existence of a book like *Desert Blood*: a brutal and extreme representation of sexual violence that assessed the role of the Mexican and U.S. Nation-States in the murders. Any embellishment of the facts would result in a disservice for the victims and their families. And yet, this backdrop was so influential in the reception of the novel that it restricted the scope of the analysis. In other words, the political immediacy of the murders (the need for a resounding critique of the Mexican and U.S. governments) shrouded any possibility of examining the novel as an artistic project, a formalistic enterprise, and as an ideological product. Without a doubt, a lot of events and changes have occurred since the original publication of *Desert Blood*. Thus, we must return to Gaspar de Alba's novel with fresh eyes and an alternative view within the context of a drastically different political climate. We need to stop understanding the novel just as a political tool (a mechanism to increase awareness of the feminicides) and, instead, decipher and comment on its formalistic and ideological qualities. In particular, I focus on two important literary dimensions of *Desert Blood*: the ideological ramifications of fictionalizing Juárez through a *queer* Chicana lens and the implications of the novel's use and simultaneous rewriting of elements and formulas of genre fiction, in particular, detective and hard-boiled fiction.

Desert Blood centers on Ivon Villa, the fictional stand-in for Gaspar de Alba, a *queer* Chicana Ph.D. student working in Los Angeles who travels to Juárez to arrange an illegal adoption for herself and her spouse with the help of Ximena, Ivon's cherished cousin, and Father Francis, a priest and founder of *Contra el Silencio* ("Against Silence") a non-profit organization in El Paso that helps women in Juárez. Predictably, the plot takes a gruesome turn when Cecilia, the pregnant girl who was meant to give her baby to Ivon, is found in an abandoned car, her body showing extreme signs of sexual torture and the baby torn and dismembered directly from her womb. Ivon's shock and indignation leads to ambivalent feelings in looking for another child to adopt, a privilege in and on itself, while a continuous series of fights with Lydia, her mother, uncover old wounds regarding her family and her identity as an open lesbian. Just a day after deciding to leave El Paso and return to Los Angeles, with the idea of preparing a dissertation on the murders, Ivon's sister, Irene, disappears. With a sudden emotional attachment to the case, Ivon becomes an improvised detective attempting to unravel the strange puzzle of the murders. Through Ivon's story and identity as a *queer* Chicana, Gaspar de Alba collapses two different sub-genres of hard-boiled detective fiction: the legacy of Chicana/o detective fiction and of lesbian detectives in particular.

In his foundational text on Chicana/o detective fiction, Ralph E. Rodríguez (2005) traces the emergence of this sub-genre with the 1980's trend of women's detective fiction and ethnic detectives, as well as the development of a healthy body of literary research on crime fiction. The success and recognition of lesbian and ethnic detective stories eventually led to a growing number of Chicano authors to explore the possibilities of this form of popular culture as a fictional space which "illuminate[s] how Chicana/os grapple with feminism, homosexuality, *familia*, masculinity, mysticism, the nationalist subject, and U.S.-Mexico border relations" (Rodríguez, 2005, p. 2). Rodríguez envisions detective

novels as both a quest for knowledge and a quest of identity where, "the successful detective enlists and combines multiple ways of knowing the world… in order to solve the crime or crimes under investigation," while simultaneously entering "into an ontological query into his/her own sense of being into the world" (p. 8). From this perspective, crime and violence in hard-boiled function as an ontological mirror that bridges the self and the outside: the detective discovers something of his or her identity through the understanding of his/her own modern alienation.

In a multitude of ways, *Desert Blood* utilizes many of the traditional elements of self-exploration and identity that are archetypes in Chicano/a detective fiction and crime fiction more broadly. Through her role as lesbian detective or investigator, Ivon positions herself as "speaking in and from within ideology," that is, as an outsider-insider of Juárez-El Paso (Sandoval, 1991, p. 2). And yet, at each step of her investigation, Ivon continuously returns to the specters of her past: her clash with her mother, Lydia, over her lesbian orientation and her decision about leaving El Paso, both ultimate acts of transgression in Mexican American culture (leaving *la familia*/family, resisting the sexist and patriarchal foundations of Mexican culture). In spite of these symbolic and physical acts of escape (through the symbolic and physical detachment from the space of El Paso and her mother), Gaspar de Alba constructs Ivon's development as a series of parallel dynamics. She reveals Ivon's profound fear of El Paso culture and the death of her father as the moment of rupture between Ivon, her mother, and the Mexican American community in the border:

> People forge things in El Paso. Someone's father can get drunk on an Easter Sunday, climb Mount Cristo Rey with a pint of rum in his pocket and a gallon of it in his liver, trip on his own drunk feet, roll down in the hill and break his neck, and folks will go, *pobrecito, Samuel Villa was such a good man, he loved his family… Denial is not a river in Egypt*, her father used to say. But nobody gets it. Nobody gets anything in El Paso. That's why Ivon had in mind to take her little

> sister away from this lithium-loaded city where nothing and nobody changed. (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 31)

This passage illustrates what, I believe, functions as the main narrative force of the novel: Ivon's continuous desire of "rescuing" her sister from the toxic influence of Lydia, Mexican conservative values, and taking Irene with her to California. This symbolic "toxicity" also contains several political and historical dimensions: the opening sentence of the passage ("People *forge* things in El Paso") and the use of the phrase "lithium-loaded city" are clear allusions to El Paso's long history of mining and smelting industries, in particular to the cultural and economic influence of the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO) and the controversies surrounding their role in environmental pollution and public health crisis (the discovery in the early 1970s of dangerous levels of lead in the water). Thus, Ivon's "rescuing" of Irene functions in two different layers: The symbolic contamination of the psyche by Mexican heteropatriarchal discourses and the physical poisoning of the body, which serves as a feminist counterpoint to historical transnational narratives of capitalist exceptionalism and modernity in the Borderlands. Still, moments like these reveal an important shortcoming of the novel. In order to expose the homophobic and colonialist foundations of the Mexican American community of El Paso, Gaspar de Alba simplifies or superficially downplays the complex and contradictory heritage of ethnoracial agency in the space of the American Southwest. For instance, she downplays and silences the connections of ASARCO, the smelting industry, and transborder labor with the identity formation of a Mexican working-class community in El Paso whose resilient collective memory continues to this day[21]. Naturally, Gaspar de Alba produces this type of ideological

[21] For further reference, see Monica Perales's (2010) *Smeltertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community*. Perales uses historical research, personal experiences and collective memories to

sidesteps for political reasons. A nuanced portrayal of transnational capitalism and the formation of border communities downplays the socioeconomical involvement of the U.S. in the feminicides and the effects of Mexican patriarchal culture. In *Desert Blood,* the looming presence of ASARCO's abandoned smokestack and Ivon's resentment and contempt for Mexican conservative values ("Ivon knew it was more urgent than ever to get her sister away from those backward Mexican ideas Ma kept trying to instill in the girl about being a good woman" [p. 99]) represent the intersection in the literary space where colonialism, capital, and gender repression conflate in a single continuum. Nonetheless, these motifs also function as transparent sites that display Gaspar de Alba's positionality and the contradictory mechanisms that undermine the effectiveness of her literary project.

Alongside the issue of the representation of violence, Ivon's rationalization of the illegal adoption remains one of the most controversial elements of *Desert Blood*. Throughout the novel, Gaspar de Alba (2005) returns to a key scene in a bookstore where a little boy asks her mother not to leave him alone, "*I thought you were gonna supervise me in the kid's section*" (p. 18). The memory is juxtaposed with Lydia's voice and her use of an old saying (or *refrán*) in Spanish that signals the long standing Mexican superstition of marrying or getting pregnant on a Tuesday, "*–En martes*, her mother's ace flew out, *no*

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reconstruct the fascinating case of *La Esmeralda* (known in local terms as Smeltertown), the neighborhood of working-class Mexican Americans who developed an entire community and support networks around ASARCO. This account is in almost complete opposition to Gaspar de Alba's. Overall, Perales recounts Smeltertown as a pivotal moment in the community of El Paso. For instance, she recounts with nostalgia on the significance of the ASARCO smokestacks, "That smokestack was a welcome beacon guiding us in our white Gran Torino home" (p. 8). In *Desert Blood*, the smokestacks represent a nightmarish vision of the past and of the legacy of an environmental disaster. Interesting enough, all of the clues and plot threads of the novel merge in ASARCO as the space where the final shootout of the novel takes place. In chapter 22, Gaspar de Alba alludes to Smeltertown in a dismissive way; the narration explains that a number of ex-Smeltertown workers crossed to the border to work for the drug cartels. Ironically, both of these contradictory heritages vanished from the physical landscape of El Paso in April, 2013, when the iconic and empty smokestacks were demolished after years of litigation and recurrent controversies (Kolenc, 2013).

te cases ni te embarques" (p. 17). The phrase symbolizes Ivon's inability to completely depart or separate from her heritage as woman of Mexican-descent. Still, the boy's voice wins, "The *not enough time* motto of Ivon's just couldn't hold up next to *he's my son*" (p. 18). At face value, the pivotal moment seems infused with clear ideological contradictions. Why the sudden obsession with adopting, of all things, a *boy*? Considering Ivon is a *queer* college-educated Chicana with a meaningful relationship with a woman, as well as a clear distrust of men and patriarchy, the sudden need for a traditional family structure feels hollow and even problematic. Could the reader react with the same empathy if a white woman uttered these monologues or if she was placed in the same ethical scenario (adopting a child from the Third World)? Similarly, the implications are even further problematized with Ivon's earlier statement of "backward Mexican ideas" and the subsequent adoption of Jorgito –the son of a terminally ill ex-*maquila* worker– by the end of the novel.

In her influential sociohistorical analysis of transracial and transnational adoption, Laura Briggs (2012) asserts that, "Stranger adoption is a national and international system whereby the children of impoverished or otherwise disenfranchised mothers are transferred to middle-class, wealthy mothers (and fathers)" (p. 4). Claudia Sadowski-Smith (2009) retakes this conceptualization in her essay on Chicana transnationalism, emphasizing how "*Desert Blood* fails to address the unequal power relations among poor Mexican and well-to-do Mexican American women like Ivon that enable the exchange of children for money –their commodification– in the first place" (p. 85). My point of contention with the novel arises not in the inner contradictions of this scene, or the ethical implications of the transnational adoption, but in the way the two plot threads of Ivon's fractured family and her newly discovered need for a child are resolved in the narrative. After being raped and tortured for days, Irene is miraculously saved by Ivon just

moments before she becomes the subject of a *snuff* film. With the bloodied body of her sister in her arms, Ivon resolves the opposing threads in one single realization, "A tiny memory she had forgotten. Six-year-old Irene saying goodbye to her at the airport, Ivon leaving for college in Iowa. Not allowing herself to cry, Irene had said, 'Pancho, I thought you were gonna help me with my homework. I'm gonna be lonely every day" (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 303)[22]. I place emphasis on this passage because Ivon comes to the realization that, "It was Irene's voice she heard in that little boy's at the bookstore" (p. 303). Thus, and following a classic structure of hard-boiled fiction, a possible reading of *Desert Blood* would indicate how the traumatic experience of Irene's kidnapping and the investigations become ontological references where Ivon unconsciously performs a self-healing of her unresolved fractures with her Chicano identity and family. In other words, Gaspar de Alba produces a *queer* (re)encoding of Chicano detective fiction through remnants of maternal bonds despite being a butch; the singular thread that unifies Irene symbolic and physical rescue, as well as the adoption of Jorgito. However, I want to further question this line of interpretation by focusing on Gaspar de Alba's use of genre fiction and Ivon's lesbian performativity in the space of El Paso.

In classic literary studies, hard-boiled fiction has been continuously traced to the legacy of the Wild West and westerns where a lone nomadic gunslinger (the detective) represents the last bastion of justice in a lawless desert (the urban space). In *Darkly Perfect World: Colonial Adventure, Postmodernism, and American Noir*, Stanley Orr (2010) proposes a controversial alternative genealogy for the genre; one not entrenched in codes of honor and law of westerns, but in colonialist fiction. The success and influence of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) led to an unprecedented boom of narratives

[22] I will return later in this chapter to the gender implications of Irene's use of the nickname "Pancho", a reference to Mexican hypermasculinity (in relation to Pancho Villa), which codes Ivon as a *butch*.

set in the dangerous and savage spaces of a constructed "Third World." Thus, the early detective fiction of legendary writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler involved tropes and formulas of these types of adventure stories. In discussing Hammett's first detective short story ("The Road Home"), Orr (2010) asserts, "In his first *Black Mask* tale, Hammett writes an epigraph for his own fiction and for the noir ethos at large… In contrast to the compromised figures of *fin-de-siècle* adventure and detection, Hagerdon remains frozen in an attitude of alienation against a hostile world, a polarization that renders him all the more distinct, coherent, and 'authentic" (p. 100). The parallels to *Desert Blood* are astonishing: A symbolic "outsider" (a Chicana lesbian) of Juárez and El Paso crosses the border into a different reality to retrieve something only to return unscathed at the end of the story. The novel centers on Ivon's journey of self-healing, a development that gives closure to her traumatic past. Ivon crosses the border to Juárez with a clear perspective on Mexican culture, homophobia, and neocolonialist forms of violence, but her involvement in the reproduction of these discourses is never radically questioned.

Literary and cultural studies scholars praised *Desert Blood* due to its allusions to the possibilities of fostering bi-national coalitions between women on both sides of the border. Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010) assert that, "unlike the characters in traditional detective fiction, Gaspar de Alba's characters only survive because they are supported by a… female community built around extended family, friends, and lovers" (p. 608). Similarly, Rachel Tillotson (2006) points out how characters such as Ximena, journalist Rubí Reyna, and Father Francis, "represent the possibility that transnational activist networks can oppose the exploitation of workers under global systems of power" (p. 25) by presenting counter-narratives to issues of gendered violence. And yet, by placing *Desert Blood* in the legacy and formulas of detective and hardboiled fiction, Gaspar de

Alba reproduces particular constructions of masculinity, heteronormative nuclear families, and narratives of exceptional heroism from First World subjects. Ironically, even as a butch, Ivon's character serves as the main evidence of this ideological contradiction.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my analysis, the death of Ivon's father leaves her with an emotional scar that only worsens with Lydia's psychological abuse. It is clear that the fracture of the family leads to Ivon becoming a sort of paternal substitute: "Now that you have a little sister, Ivon, you have a job to do. You are your sister's keeper from now on" (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 131). This forced transfer of familial responsibility slowly morphs into guilt after Ivon leaves El Paso, a moment that comes full circle when Ivon links her decision of adopting a child (the boy in the bookstore) with Irene's goodbye when she was a little girl (after saving her at the end of the novel). This symbolic substitution of the patriarch adds a controversial dimension to the supposed transgressive *queerness* of Ivon. Many characters in the novel connect Ivon with powerful or iconic masculine heroes alongside stereotypes of female empowerment. In several key moments, these relations become genealogical, "Ivon was a Taurus, daughter of a man who considered himself a great-grandson of the hardheaded Pancho Villa and an Apache woman" (p. 17). In another passage, Ivon's grandmother Maggie states a similar heritage running through their family's history, "*I've got the blood of a bullfighter and a gypsy in my veins. I'll either kill you or curse you if you get in my way*" (p. 26). These references permeate the entire novel through Ivon's butch nicknames, "Pancho" and "Ivanhoe" (by her cousin Ximena). More importantly, however, the notion of hypermasculinity and a feminine body is exhibited in the most direct way through Ivon's embodiment of a *queer* masculinity. Throughout *Desert Blood*, Ivon maintains a transgressive form of Chicana lesbian performativity through men's clothing, "She

decided to add a touch of lipstick to defuse the looks she was bound to get from people not used to seeing a woman in a *guayabera*" (p. 31). This corporeal experience extends to other attitudes and manners: Ivon has street smarts, a painfully honest and aggressive attitude towards homophobic men (and women) that populate the story. And yet, this extensive network of masculine signifiers represents the site where Ivon becomes ostracized. Her unapologetic masculinity makes her the "Other" in Mexican culture, a fact repeatedly emphasized through Lydia's use of the slur *marimacha* (butch). Thus, we must avoid the naïve implications of reading the novel as a particular construction of *queer* aesthetics of resistance.

Instead, tracing the colonialist origins of hardboiled fiction reveals an intricate continuum where Ivon's Chicana lesbian identity shifts from a transgressive performativity to a symbolic embodiment of the patriarch and the hypermasculine sleuth of detective fiction. Thus, instead of decoding the butch-Chicana-feminist experience of Ivon as a mechanism of self-making, we need to problematize the clear implications of a Chicana lesbian gradually assuming the place of the patriarch and the hardboiled detective in the colonized space of Juárez. The completion of this symbolic reconfiguration occurs in the final confrontation with Irene's kidnappers. After the arrival of the police, Irene flees to a nearby graveyard where she is chased by a pack of rabid dogs. Ivon manages to save her (the symbolic daughter) only after taking the gun from a wounded policeman, Officer McCuts[23], "Irene's out there, alive, I know it. Help me save

[23] In some key chapters, Gaspar de Alba (2005) shifts the perspective of the narrative to other female characters (such as Irene and Raquel). However, there are only two instances in which the narrative centers on men. Chapter 19 focuses on one of the killers and the kidnapping of a girl from Juárez. On the other hand, Chapter 20 introduces Pete McCuts, a rookie detective and son of Judge Anacleto Ramírez. McCuts was the result of a deal betwen Anacleto and Berenice Tinareja, a lesbian mechanic. The origin of his unusual name comes from Anacleto's interest in poetry, "... he's always wanted to name a son after the muses" (p. 157). Thus, each letter of the name represents one of the muses, "Polyhymnia, muse of the Song; Euterpe, muse of Lyric Poetry; Thalia, muse of Comedy; Erato, muse of Love Poetry... There's Melpomene, the muse of Tragedy; Clio, the muse of History; Calliope, muse of Epic Poetry; Urania, muse

her.' He handed her his gun. 'It's a .40 caliber,' he said" (p. 300). This moment marks Ivon's ultimate transformation into the detective, the symbolic taking of the gun (the patriarchal phallic symbol of power) that represents one of the most important signifiers of the sleuth-gunslinger brand of heteropatriarchal law. Thus, *Desert Blood* works less as a *queer* reencoding of detective fiction, and more as a questionable symbolic configuration of a *queer* patriarchy through neocolonialist elements of literary genres and Chicano/a post-nationalism. At the end of *Desert Blood*, Ivon leaves the dangerous space of Juárez unscathed, with a new family and perception of life with only some vague hints ("Then she thought of the families of the murdered women… Just be careful you have a family, Ivon" [p. 341]) of the supposed transnational coalitions that supporters of the novel claim represents the main motivation of the novel's plot.

In a multitude of ways, the neocolonialist foundations of Gaspar de Alba's project exhibit the drawbacks of the supposed transnationalist discourses of *Desert Blood*. Because the novel can only function as a narrative centered and written from the perspective of a *queer* Chicana, then the murders of Juárez are only the catalyst of the on-going process of Ivon's self-healing (and, by extension, of the author) and her reconfiguration of the Mexican *familia*. This results in the questionable fact that the women representing the true driving force of the transnational movements in Mexico –the mothers of the victims who dared to resist the fabrications and corruption of the Mexican government– are either silenced or placed in the background in *Desert Blood*. Even if the murders exist as the centerpiece of the fictional space, the narrative's sociopolitical

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of Astronomy; Terpsichore, muse of the Dance; and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the tenth muse of Mexico" (p. 157). These two details (McCuts as the son of a lesbian and his name as the representation of women's historical legacies) indicate that Gaspar de Alba codes McCuts as a sort of feminized male, or, in a different register, as a homopatriarchal *queer* character. In other words, Ivon's taking of the gun from Pete's hand could be read as the reification of a *queer* detective. Still, I believe that this interpretation does not undermine my main argument since we need to take into consideration that McCuts embodies the role of the state as the site of masculine juridico-political power.

motifs shift from questions of fractured states, corruption, and the agency of women in Juárez to ethnoracial issues such as citizenship, cultural alienation, assimilation, and the presence of Ivon's homosexual identity in the Borderlands. Even though the critique is of conservative societies, the experience of middle-class border crossers, and the role of the U.S. in the neoliberal economy of Mexico, it is still the story of a First World Chicana butch subject as the hero and savior who enacts a voyeuristic gaze over the Third World.

A good example of the ways that Gaspar de Alba prioritizes a feminist Chicana discourse over other sociopolitical issues happens in the pivotal moment of Irene's kidnapping. In chapter 14, Raquel, Ivon's ex-lover[24], invites Irene to a Juárez carnival with a group of young Mexican girls. Irene is bullied and labeled a *pocha*, an assimilated Mexican, which provokes her into "playing wetback", that is, jumping in the river-border between cities to taunt the Border Patrol. In *The Latino Body*, Lázaro Lima (2007) asserts the river serves as a physical signifier, exhibiting the permeable nature of citizenship and bodily experience in the border, "Like the women dumped in the river after death, the river that delineates citizenship and delimit the body's ability to *mean* [which] sets the narrative pretext from which to indict both Mexico and the United States for the Juárez murders" (p. 167). I disagree with this interpretation because it disregards the diverse dimensions of the sequence. While Gaspar de Alba uses this scene to evidence how brown women (no matter if they are U.S. citizens, Mexican, or Chicana) are inevitably objectified in the in-between spaces of two nations, the implication that the scene intends to "indict" both countries for the murders is beyond the point. The scene could be read as

[24] Ivon and Raquel had a passionate, but conflicted relationship due to Raquel's closeted lesbian identity. Following my line of inquiry of hardboiled fiction, Raquel can be read as the femme fatale since Raquel secretly engages in an affair with Ximena, Ivon's cousin, and expresses some dubious interest in Irene. This reading comes to a close when Ivon punches Raquel in the face after she discovers that Raquel took Irene to a crack house (where she is ultimately kidnapped), a scene that has become an staple of the genre (the moment where the detective inflicts punishment over the "bad" woman).

a symbolic baptism, where a Mexican American woman enters the broken space of the Mexican Nation-State after being objectified and "otherized" by other women. In fact, most of the chapter centers on Irene's feelings of cultural alienation and her status as an outsider from Juárez and the other Mexican girls: "She looked like them…, yet, she didn't belong. She was an American. To a lot of people that meant sell-out" (p. 104). Although the narration frames Irene's action as mindless, "It occurred she had never taken a swim in the Rio Grande before" (p. 110), it is clear that the context of the scene (the influence of alcohol and the antagonistic attitude of the other girls) establishes the act as an unconscious expression of showing the broad limits of her privileged agency (the fact that she can mock the Border Patrol because of her status as a U.S. citizen). And yet, we also need to add the environmental reading, that is, Irene swimming in the contaminated ("lithium-loaded") water of the Rio Grande as the improvised dump where all the toxic waste of the *maquilas* ends up. Thus, three different layers of bodily meaning coexist in this moment: juridical-legal (citizenship), cultural (in-betweenness and assimilation), and environmental. And yet, my issue with this sequence (and Lima's interpretation) lays not so much on the fact that it fails at providing a meaningful political critique (as I established in this paragraph, I think Gaspar de Alba achieves a coherent discourse), but in the notion that this whole chapter fails as an effective and convincing character moment. This criticism does not imply the unlikely nature of such a scenario (a girl of Mexican descent "playing wetback" in the Rio Grande). After all, Gaspar de Alba grew up in El Paso and I am not in a position to question her vivid experiences as a native from the border. Rather, we need to point out the nontransparent nature of the sequence. In other words, it feels, in literary and aesthetic terms, artificial. Almost as if Gaspar de Alba was forced to include such a series of events just to regress the narrative to the usual tropes and formulas of Chicano fiction: stereotypical constructions of the border,

questions of cultural assimilation, Chicanos/as as cultural "outsiders", and the fluxes of transborder identities.

The last and most difficult question that I wish to discuss is whether Gaspar de Alba achieves a nuanced and complex representation of sexual violence or, on the contrary, reproduces a voyeuristic representation of border violence. In many ways, the novel interconnects the issue of torture and misogynist brutality with the subject of motherhood (the bodies of pregnant women) as the center of the formation of the Nation-State and the construction of the Third World subject. As such, the novel opens with a graphic description of the murder and torture of Cecilia, the pregnant girl whose baby Ivon was supposed to adopt: "The rope tightened around her neck, and she felt her belly drag over sand and rocks, the wound on her breast pricked by sagebrush. She was numb below the waist, and her face ached from the beating" (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 1). The sequence continues with a graphic description of the murderers tearing Cecilia's baby from her womb and stabbing it in an almost ritualistic fashion, "[She] felt a current of night air deep inside her, belly hanging open… and someone else stabbed into the bag of water and bones–that's all it is, the nurse at the factory once told her, a bag of water and bones" (p. 2). I believe that the murder of the baby is the most significant[25] moment in the context of the narrative because it manifests itself as the central motif of *Desert Blood*

[25]I do not wish to imply that the representation of violence in the novel is unimportant. In fact, existent scholarship on *Desert Blood* focused extensively on this topic. Nonetheless, this complex issue goes beyond the scope of my analysis. That said, critics such as López Lozano (2012) have analyzed the scene of Cecilia's murder as a transgressive comment, "on the male gaze as a form of control…" and the role of "the viewer's voyeuristic pleasure" (p. 142). However, this superficial reading lacks a critical question on the symbolic implications of the use of a third person omniscient narrator to describe sexual torture. Although the use of this technique signals an outsider perspective that could potentially be read as a critique of the voyeuristic attraction of sexual violence, this reading also encompasses the challenges of assessing the limits between the subjectivity of the reader and her/his morbid fascination with the bodies of brown women. Indeed, why does Gaspar de Alba justify the use of a third-person perspective? Why avoid a first-person perspective? Is an inside-the-body point of view more sensationalistic and pornographic than an outside perspective? We urgently need to question the implications of the author's positionality and fiction as a system embedded in cultural and economic capital.

and as a return to the components of Chicana fiction that I have questioned thus far. The short and horrifying sequence exposes a number of simultaneous elements. The narration establishes how Cecilia was drugged with some kind of anesthetics that made her "numb below the waist" (p. 1), meaning that the murderers clearly wanted to extract the fetus. The fact that an extreme form of misogynistic violence is extended to an unborn baby is interconnected to a plot thread involving Ivon's discovery of *maquilas* as sites of illegal experimentation and control of the reproductive rights of women. Ivon realizes this connection in her meeting with Elsa, the mother of Jorgito. Afflicted with a terminal form of ovarian cancer, Elsa claims that Amen Hakim Hassan (the fictional version of the Egyptian suspect, Latif Shariff) performed some kind of test to prove the efficiency of a new contraceptive, "And then he put something else inside me… it was sharp, almost like a needle" (p. 91). Thus, Ivon concludes that Amen inseminated Elsa and the product of this experiment was Jorgito[26] ("You knew the kid… came from the sperm of a pervert and possible serial killer" [p. 97]). This detail emphasizes a biological essentialist discourse that implies how only a *queer* privileged person like Ivon can save the boy from his violent genetic destiny. In essence, Gaspar de Alba collapses a large and overtly complex number of discourses on the question of feminicide: transnational capital as complicit in the control of reproductive rights and the commodification of brown bodies, which, in turn, transforms into physical violence inflicted on pregnant women (and their babies) as the biological (and symbolic) foundation and crisis of the Nation-State in the era of global capital. López-Lozano (2010) associates these discourses with "the fear of a brown nation that has been a constant in Chicano/a narratives" (p. 145). Still, even if the

[26] The fact that Jorgito was the product of a rape, and the moment when Ivon takes this fact as a reasonable justification in declining the adoption, opens a risky and questionable discourse on genetics and biology. More importantly, the fact that Amen is Egyptian implies the reproduction of stereotypical discourses of the supposed sexism and exotic danger of Arab men.

themes of sexual violence as the intersection of transnational capital and patriarchy made sense at an abstract and political level, Gaspar de Alba's narrative continues to crumble under its own ideological pretensions. Consequently, we need to address the problematic fact that Gaspar de Alba resolves (or, in a sense, sidesteps) the intricate question of motherhood and the effects of neoliberalism resolved in the narrative through the questionable framework of transnational adoption.

After the murder of Cecilia, Ximena tries to change Ivon's mind on the issue of adoption through the description of Jorgito's precarious situation. She asserts that if Ivon declines the adoption, the kid will suffer the fate of other countless orphans of Juárez, "begging on the bridge, getting rounded up by some child prostitution ring or running drugs back and forth across the border" (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 82). Thus, Ivon accepts to see the child and meet Elsa, the mother. The meeting in Chapter 12 signals, without a doubt, the most problematic moment of the entire novel (even moreso than the graphic murder of Cecilia), one filled with a stereotypical imaginary of Third World poverty. The narrative explains that, "Elsa lived at the back of a greasy spoon called *El Rinconcito* near Downtown Juárez. Elsa's grandmother, Doña Hermelinda, a hunchback who shuffled around in slippers… ran the restaurant" (p. 86). The first glimpse of Jorgito suggests an objectifying gaze heightened by the image of an almost naked child, "The little boy sat on the edge of the bed, sucking his thumb and watching television. He wore nothing but briefs and a skinned cap" (p. 87). The following discussion between Ivon, Ximena and Elsa particularizes every feature of Jorgito's body: rotted teeth, numerous bruises on his head (caused by Hermelinda), signs of poor nutrition, leg deformities, and a noticeable smell "of urine" (pp. 82-83). Sensationalized images of child poverty have a long history and exist as archetypical imperialistic practices of decoding the "South" as space of decay. Jason Ruiz (2014) traces this phenomenon in pre-Revolutionary Mexico (under

the rule of dictator Porfirio Díaz) where, "Images of destitute, naked, parentless children raised the question about whether, to paraphrase, brown children needed rescuing from brown parents" (p. 36). Through the framing of the child, the reader cannot question the sociopolitical implications of the adoption since this represents the only viable solution to rescuing Jorgito from the dangerous space of Juárez. Although Ivon rationalizes the situation, "it wasn't Elsa's fault, or the grandmother's either. They were doing what they could to survive their poverty and Elsa's illness" (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 89), the narrative never explicitly questions the complex network of power that reproduces very specific discourses of imperialism. Gaspar de Alba is careful to shift the discourse to this issue since the meeting then returns to Elsa as the victim of an illegal insemination, effectively circumventing the questionable and blurry limits of transnational adoption. Because the author presents a diverse number of issues, some, such as the adoption of Jorgito, amount to nothing more in the narrative than one more component of Ivon's process of reconstructing her broken *familia*; regardless of the moral and political implications of these actions.

REGARDING THE RECEPTION OF THE NOVEL

Lastly, I wish to discuss, in very brief terms, the reception of the novel. In the opening disclaimer of *Desert Blood*, Gaspar de Alba (2005) asserts, "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… to the English-speaking public" (p. vi). This straightforward statement clearly establishes Gaspar de Alba's honest intentions and although some scholars[27] questioned the particular limitations of the novel

[27] Irene Mata (2010) believes that representations of the Third World (and Mexico in particular) tend to reproduce the imperialistic myth of the "savior from the north." However, she concludes that the

in constructing Juárez and the agency of Mexican women, critics ultimately find that the novel succeeds at representing the sociopolitical grounds of the feminicides. In this sense, the available literature on Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood* remains limited and very homogenous in nature. In discussing *Desert Blood* with colleagues, students, and professors of literature, however, the reactions are more diverse and ambivalent. In a seminar on decolonization, one Latina scholar pointed out how it was difficult for her to resolve the "pornographic" nature of the violence in the novel with the larger political goals of Gaspar de Alba's in widening the recognition of feminicide and of transnational activism in Juárez. Another English student suggested that the detective formula of the novel might actually hinder its impact, that is, the text becomes a commodity. In other words, Gaspar de Alba's use of the tropes of detective and hardboiled fiction, besides reproducing certain neocolonialist discourses, could also be wrongly interpreted as a marketing gimmick more than an actual literary technique. At the same time, both comments disclose how we have failed to see these novels beyond sociopolitical critiques of Nation-States, rather that as representations of certain modes of racial and gender identity. After all, a novel is part of larger system of production and its formalistic and structural elements reveal much of the aesthetic and political project of the author. In the end, *Desert Blood* works as an effective autobiographical account of Chicana identities and as a postcolonial critique of El Paso, but fails as a realist novel centered on Juárez realities. A work of fiction reflects ideology and the author's positionality, while also being a commodity that can be co-opted, reconfigured and interpreted by a diverse audience. Thus, we need to seriously consider the implications of Gaspar de Alba's

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oppositional project of Gaspar de Alba avoids this discourse in *Desert Blood*. Using a similar rhetorical move, López-Lozano (2010) subtly questions how literary representations of Juárez may "perpetuate the deeply ingrained stereotype of the border as a zone of terror in which justice, dignity, and humanity fail to flourish" (p. 148). And yet, both scholars ultimately conclude that these novels are necessary in fostering political awareness of patriarchal oppression.

(2005) claims that *Desert Blood* is meant to encourage awareness of the Juárez murders in the vaguely defined symbolic arena of the "English speaking public" (p. vi).

IF I DIE IN JUÁREZ: INDIGENOUS MYSTICISM AND LEGACIES OF COLONIZATION

Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez* shares many of the themes, motifs, and limitations with Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*. The most obvious difference between the two is in terms of style and genre. While *Desert Blood* functions under the formulas of crime fiction and detective novels, Duarte's novel is a more traditional and straightforward drama with a heavy reliance upon coming-of-age elements and motifs. A female *Bildungsroman*, *If I Die in Juárez* follows the interconnected lives of three girls and their struggle for survival in the Borderlands: Evita Reynosa, a girl who is forced into prostitution through a number of circumstances, including, but not limited, to poverty and familial alienation; Petra de la Rosa, Evita's cousin and a recent immigrant from the fictional village of Montenegro (the novel hints that it is located in Chihuahua), who arrives to Juárez with her family to find medical aid for her father and the chance of working in the *maquilas*; and Mayela, a *Tarahumara* Indian who experiences extreme poverty and suffering in Juárez until she is rescued by a local orphanage and achieves international recognition as a painter. Each section of the novel alternates between each of the main characters' lives, which continually intersect, but only merge at the conclusion of the story when all of the different threads converge in the kidnapping and subsequent rescue of Petra.

The most notable difference between the novels is, without a doubt, their particular *framing* of gender. In *Desert Blood,* the semi-autobiographical experiences of Gaspar de Alba as a *queer* woman are contra-posed against the vitriolic heteronormative

discourses of gender and sexuality that permeate the conservative society of Juárez-El Paso. In Duarte's novel, on the other hand, the gender discourse is firmly based on a second-wave feminism that reconstructs the U.S.-Mexico border as colonialist space inscribed in a symbolic, all consuming, fabric of patriarchy that cuts across gender, race, and class. And yet, this complex intersection of space and misogyny collapses in its most paradoxical form in the distinct emphasis that Duarte places on Indigenous bodies and their cultural spirituality, capitulating to Mexican national schemes. Thus, in this section, I examine how Duarte's project in placing patriarchy as a unifying discourse of violence, while encoding women's agency and resistance through a contradictory and nostalgic discourse of Indigeneity, which results in her role (perhaps unconscious) in reproducing the epistemic colonialism that she strives to critique.

The intersection of Indigenous spirituality and gender decolonization remains an important issue in the development of Chicana feminism and border theory. In *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) reconstructs the history of the Aztecs by revealing the epistemic erasure of a matriarchal and heterogenous cosmogony and its eventual transformation into a masculinized society founded on war and violence. Anzaldúa asserts that the ruler *Itzcoatl,* "rewrote a mythology that validated the wars of conquest and thus continued the shift from a tribe based on clans to one based on classes" (p. 54). In other words, the influence of patriarchy is so invasive that even history and religion is reframed to justify the symbolic control and exploitation of women. Still, this admittedly idealized narrative of lost origins and matriarchal invisibility serves as clear ideological counterpoint to the mystic-aesthetic and Mendelian-inspired configurations of post-Revolutionary Mexican nationalism. In *The Cosmic Race*, Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos (1997) envisioned the synthesis of all races into a superior universal race, "All the tendencies of the future are intertwined in the present: Mendelianism in biology,

socialism in government, growing sympathy among the souls, generalized progress, and the emergence of the fifth race that will fill the planet with the triumphs of the first universal, truly cosmic culture" (p. 39). On some levels, these narratives stand in complete opposition to one another, but they also exhibit clear interconnections (for example, Anzaldúa's use of the concept of "cosmic race" in *Borderlands/La Frontera*). The implications of both theses are useful for understanding the most controversial aspects of *If I Die in Juárez*, since they exemplify the spaces of cultural anxiety in the fractures of border and Mexican identities: obsessions with a lost and pure Indigeneity, as well as issues of racial superiority and the genetic mixing of European and Indian blood; intersections of class, gender, and race; and questions of racial and bodily refashioning of identity. All of these components exist, in one way or another, in Duarte's novel.

One of the main characters of the novel, Mayela, is first introduced as a *Tarahumara*[28] Indian who arrives at Juárez with her aunt, Cina. Trying to escape the violent rage and abuses of her husband in Montenegro, Cina is soon entangled with Sebastián, a *Náhuatl* from Yucatán. A dangerous and manipulative man, Sebastián is introduced as an overt example of normative masculinity ingrained in the symbolic power of the phallus (a *machete*): "Sebastian had nothing, not even a hole to crawl into, but he imagined himself powerful because he carried his *machete* with him… and once in a while he used it to defend himself, as is the right of any man" (Duarte, 2008, p. 111). After a series of events, Sebastian convinces Cina to live with him in an improvised hut.

[28] In an official report co-authored by the State Government of Chihuahua and *La Coordinación Estatal de la Tarahumara* (State Department of *la Tarahumara*), the *tarahumaras* or *rarámuris* from the mountains of Chihuahua are "the majoritarian ethnic group. Their communities were the first to engage in contact with the Spaniards. The territory was occupied by an important number of Indigenous nations, such as *tubares*, *tobosos*, *cocoyomes*, *conchos*, *jovas*, *guazapares*, *chínipas*, *salineros*, *guarojíos* and *pimas*. The *tarahumaras* designate themselves as *rarámuri*, which loosely translates to "*corredor de a pie*" (foot runners)." The full report is available in the official website of *La Coordinación Estatal de la Tarahumara* (http://chihuahua.gob.mx/tarahumara/).

One night, Mayela discovers the couple having intercourse under the blankets, which ignites Sebastián's fury: "He grabbed *el machete* from its leather sheath and brandished it like a madman. Mayela saw the blade shining in the moonlight and was terrified he'd kill her and Cina" (p. 128). The contraposition of the moonlight, Sebastián's nudity, and the machete suggest a nightmarish apparition that feels savage and fierce, an ironic image considering the fact that the sequence portraits physical and psychological violence enacted vis-à-vis Indian bodies. The scene echoes Anzaldúa's ideas because it constructs a dichotomy, Sebastián as an example of a masculine Indian savage as clearly separated from a pure matriarchal Indian mysticism.

The strangest moment in Sebastián's development as a character, however, is the revelation that he holds a supernatural control over Cina through the power of *El imán* ("The Magnet"), "a black crystal that came from the same rock used by Christ as His resting place after His death" (Duarte, 2008, p. 112). In a key scene, Mayela watches Sebastián while he proceeds to chant, invoking the mystical powers of the magnet, "I give you gold for my treasure / Silver for my house / Copper for the poor man / Coral, so you remove from me envy and evil, / Wheat so that Cina will be my wife, as fate will have it" (p. 121). The presence of pagan syncretism, his fluency of *Náhuatl*, his allusions to migrating to Juárez from Yucatán; the phallocentric and masculinist connotations of Sebastian obsession with his weapon, and his misogynist behavior towards women and girls suggest a veiled reference to the "Caste War" (*La Guerra de Castas*). The Mayan rebellion whose history covers almost two centuries and originated because of inequalities produced by the racial hierarchy in the peninsula of Yucatán. In the late 1850s, the sudden and supernatural apparition of a Maya-speaking cross leads to the formation of "the separatist capital of Chan Santa Cruz… This was the beginning of a militant messianic cult that was to rally lagging rebel forces and that would endure for

more than a century" (Dumond, 1985, p. 291). Sebastian's hinting at using his machete "to defend himself, as is the right of any man" perhaps alludes to the possibility of his status as member of one of the Chan Santa Cruz factions. In a different level, the character also echoes Anzaldúa's (re)reading of the Aztec empire. Indeed, Duarte uses the character of Sebastián (a symbolic Aztec/Mayan) to embody the ways in which the legacies of Christianity and hetero-patriarchal mechanisms of control overlap or reconfigure the spiritual legacies of Indigenous beliefs, which, in turn, produce or legitimize gender oppression. And yet, the fact that Sebastián is never coded as Mayan indicates a clear historical contradiction if we follow this line of logic[29]. Nonetheless, reading Sebastian as an example of a violent and patriarchal Indigeneity makes sense in the context of the narrative; particularly when this discourse is taken to its most problematic and dangerous extremes in the construction of Indigenous cultures and the other male Indian character in the novel, Narciso Odin.

After living in extreme poverty, and almost dying due to a severe case of meningitis, Mayela is rescued and sheltered by *El Instituto de Niños Huérfanos*, a local orphanage in Juárez, where she befriends Sylvia Huddleston, an American doctor, and Narcisco Odin, an old *Huichol* Indian who becomes "the father she had never known in Chitlitipin" (Duarte, 2008, p. 173). Narciso is initially portrayed as a positive and sympathetic figure, protecting Mayela from the constant bullying and harassment enacted by the abandoned children in the institute. Still, this initial representation is shattered when Narciso invites Mayela to participate with his family and community in their yearly

[29] There are two possible explanations of this apparent narrative hole: 1) Sebastián is not Mayan nor a part of the Chan Santa Cruz and his macho stories of revenge and persecution are completely fabricated; 2) Sebastián is a poser, perhaps he is just a poor mestizo who learned or grew up among *Náhuatl* peoples, something that could explain the hybrid (pagan and Catholic dimensions of the *iman*) nature of his beliefs. However, the narrative does not provide enough evidence to justify either reading.

celebration of Christmas Eve. Duarte's (2008) description of the *Huichol* rituals and culture in this chapter is troubling and is worth quoting at length here:

> The men sat on the ground to smoke *el peyote*, and soon everyone was drunk or drugged up. As the night wore on, the dancers got wild, and some of the men started kissing and touching the women… By this time, Mayela had stopped dancing and was frightened to see that no one seemed to care what anybody was doing. Narciso told her to sit by him and not be afraid. When he offered her a drink of *tesgüino*, she told him she had never had liquor before and refused to take it. Then she saw Nubia and Narciso's second wife, both drunk, eyeing her and pointing their fingers at her. (p. 174)

The passage's tone and style suggests a nightmarish scene that is filled with colonialist contempt. This underlying discourse is taken even further at the end of the chapter, when Narciso attempts to rape Mayela and turn her into one of his mistresses. I need to point out that I fully understand the literary goals that undermine this passage. Duarte uses Sebastian and Narciso to emphasize how the fabric of heteronormativity and patriarchy is fully engraved even in the rituals and lifestyle of Indigenous communities. The other questionable dimension of this portrayal is the fact that it represents traditional cultures and ritual as backwards and anti-modern. In other words, this sequence reproduces ethnocentric discourses that legitimize Western models of nuclear families as the basis of a healthy society. Thus, Duarte cannot provide a nuanced historically accountable representation of Indigenous culture because the narrative is forced to present, above all other discourses, the extent of epistemic and physical violence that occurs when heterosexual masculinity is normalized, to such a degree, that it is etched in the foundations of culture. As Nicola Gavey (2005) points out, "the discourses of sex and gender that produce forms of heterosex… [and] set up the preconditions of rape – women's passive, acquiescing (a)sexuality and men's forthright, urgent pursuit of sexual

'release" (p. 3). Thus, even in the context of Indigenous cultures, women become the passive safe keepers of men's sexual urges. Nonetheless, even when Duarte has a powerful and justifiable position, it is difficult to disregard the obvious implications that are crystallized in the representation of *Huichol* culture, particularly in the novel's description of practices such as polygamy and the use of drugs and alcohol. For instance, the function and significance of *peyote* "is central to *Huichol* beliefs and *marakame* are the trusted guides who unfold its mysteries. A little hallucinogenic cactus, *hicuri* is the manifestation of God's presence on earth. *Hicuri* is the way to enlightenment and health" (Hammerschlag, 2009, p. 247). Notably, *Tarahumara* culture also shares a long history of peyote consumption, a fact that remains unmentioned, despite Mayela being a *Tarahumara* herself.

Thus, Duarte seems to selectively disclose the traditions and cultures of different Indigenous populations to the degree in which she constructs a baffling hierarchy of positive and negative qualities of Indigenous spirituality. Although this is clearly not the glorification of Indigeneity we see in Anzaldua's work, the representation still contains notable contradictions. In particular, the portrayal of male Indigenous characters is questionable and almost paradoxical when placed alongside the representation of Anglo-American characters and the symbolic coding of whiteness in the novel. Consequently, if modern Indianess signals the merging of tradition and patriarchy, then white modernity represents the space where this structures can be overcome or challenged.

The first allusion to whiteness in the story occurs in the opening chapter of the novel, which represents Evita and the death of her brother Fidel, "one of the few albinos ever born in Juárez" (Duarte, 2008, p. 4), signaling the presence of white skin as a sign of otherness. On the other hand, in several key scenes, a number of characters describe Evita as light-skinned. "Your skin is light, not dark like mine. You're made to wear red" (p.

70), explains Anabel, an abused girl that befriends Evita. In contrast, the rest of the main characters (Petra and Mayela) are never explicitly coded by the color of their skin. Whiteness in *If I Die in Juárez* functions as a complex system of meaning, a sign that can represent abjection, beauty, intrinsic violence, the existence of the foreign or even genetic abnormality (such as Fidel). However, most of the coded white characters in the novel are positioned in a clear-cut dichotomy. On one side, Duarte presents the Anglo-Saxon characters such as Dr. Sylvia Huddleston (a white scholar working in the orphanage where Mayela lives), Harry Hughes (a soldier who falls in love with Evita), and Gabriela Lafarge (a rich French woman) as kind foreigners who offer empathy and understanding to the main characters. On the other side, Mexican characters coded as white are presented as evil or in a negative light. In other words, only pure Caucasian individuals, and not *mestizos* or half-breeds, have superior moral character. The best example of this essentialized binary of good and bad whiteness is Agustín Miramontes, the only character whose whiteness represents danger, evilness, and a product of colonization. Married to Lafarge and the heir of a powerful empire (his family owns many *maquilas*), Agustín is viewed by the female characters of the novel (particularly Petra) as possessing a kind of seductive attraction, a fact that clashes with his brutal misogyny and his double life as a twisted murderer of women. Miramontes remains a pivotal character because he collapses three different discourses around the racial and identity motifs in the novel: the question of racial purity, the effects of patriarchal authority in men, and the class-divide (and its interconnectedness with race and gender) of contemporary Mexico.

Throughout the course of the plot, Miramontes grooms Petra to his liking and subsequently kidnaps her, raping her for days. At that moment, he reveals to her the history of his family. He is a direct descendant of Cortés, "He was my grandfather, el conquistador himself. Who knows which one of his bastard sons I am! Do you like it?

I'm a conqueror–there's nothing you can do but submit, again and again and again!" (Duarte 2008, p. 295). The underlying self-hatred of the statements identifies him as one of Cortéz's "bastard sons." Thus, he is racially "impure", a *mestizo*, and the product of rape as a form of domination (the conquest of Mexico through the domination of Indian women). In detailing the long history of rape in California (and by extension, all of the territory that today is known as the American Southwest and the U.S.-Mexico border), Antonia I. Castañeda (1993) asserts, "the sexual and other violence toward Amerindian women… can best be understood as ideologically justified violence institutionalized in the structures and relations of conquest initiated in the fifteenth century" (p. 29). Even if this passage of *If I Die in Juárez* lacks any form of subtlety or historical accuracy, the significance is obvious: Duarte uses this genealogy as evidence of a historical continuum of rape and sexual terrorism embedded in the formation of *mestizo* culture. Thus, the revelation implies a larger set of complicated discourses: Is Duarte implying that Mexican males are biologically coded as abusers or is she signaling a particular elitist heritage celebrated in the Mexican upper classes (the obsession with whiteness and the purity of Spanish blood)? The answer is quite simple. As I stated earlier, a clear second-wave feminism runs across Duarte's literary project. Thus, the sexism inherent in both *mestizo* and Indigenous men in *If I Die in Juárez* flattens racial difference in favor of a essentialized notion of a universal patriarchy that is present in Mexican masculinities.

Another possible interpretation of Miramontes involves how patriarchal abuse in the conservative and masculinist Mexican upper-classes morphs into misogyny. Miramontes displays hatred and contempt towards his father and uncle, Beltran, which implies a history of abuse or psychological humiliation, "There was an edge in Beltran's voice that Agustín had learned to dread–like his father's voice, an edge that drove him into fits of madness" (Duarte, 2008, p. 314). However, it is also important to remember

that society's racial and gender divides are reified through class. Agustín manipulates Petra by showing her the excesses and privileges of Mexican high society (elegant parties and restaurants, access to a transnational life in El Paso). The moment when he reveals his dark side comes with Petra's realization that Miramontes only has contempt for the poor, "I know how you people are from *los ranchos*–those little villages where you live like animals… What do you know about elegance?... And why should someone who knows nothing about elegance be allowed to live?" (p. 296). In consequence, Miramontes collapses a large network of colonialist motifs that exist in the foundations of *mestizo* culture. Indeed, this racist and sexist characterization is so extreme (to the point where it reaches a cartoonish villainy), that Duarte is incapable of providing a positive counterpoint. Indeed, if this internalized colonialism in Mexican identity can be overcome, the novel never explicitly states it. Instead, alongside Dr. Huddleston and Lafarge, Harry Hughes represents another major example of how Caucasian characters can overcome these discourses of prejudice and illustrate universal empathy.

A soldier stationed at Fort Bliss who falls madly in love with Evita, Hughes is portrayed in a sympathetic and progressive light. According to the narration, Harry's empathy towards Juárez and Mexicans is due to her aunt Dominica, "She had lived in poverty on the streets of Tijuana, a child nobody wanted, and now she was a good wife to his uncle…Harry saw the Mexican people in a different way through his aunt Dominica, who was a gentle woman" (Duarte, 2008, pp. 241-242). Here, the narration subtly hints at the possibility that Dominica was a prostitute, since Harry's uncle, also a soldier, met her while he was stationed in Tijuana. This passage works on two levels: it humanizes Mexican women, as resilient and brave, but it does so by reproducing stereotypical narratives of white men saving poor brown women. At the same time, this story foreshadows Hughes' relationship with Petra de la Rosa. The young soldier is

instrumental in saving Petra after she is kidnapped by Miramontes, even at the cost of his privileged position as a soldier. The rest of the servicemen make fun of him and his sensitive inclinations. For instance, one sergeant describes Evita as, "Harry's Mexican whore" (p. 309). Still, he cannot escape the strange attraction of Juárez that borders into stereotypical exoticism, "Mexico was like another world… He loves the gaiety of the Mexican people, their humility, warmth, and their music" (p. 241). The narrative explains that Hughes is deeply aware of the poverty of Juárez, but the novel never problematizes the implications for Hughes, or any of the other white characters, as representatives of U.S. power structures and law in a seemingly permeable transnational space such as Juárez. The contradictions are evident: Duarte represents Juárez as a neocolonialist and patriarchal space, while unconsciously perpetuating the myth of American exceptionalism (a notion of radical and extraordinary individualism entrenched in the ideological foundations and identity of the United States). In other words, Hughes embodies the possibility of *modernity* (as signaled by his last name, a reference to American entrepreneur, Howard Hughes) and, of someone capable of transcending the limits of the misogynistic foundations of Juarez because of his status as an outsider. On the other hand, the two male Indigenous characters are denied of any form of redemption. In the end, Duarte does not circumvent an essentialist feminism that reproduces a dangerous binary between First and Third World masculinities, between (pure) matriarchal and masculine Indigenous beliefs.

Lastly, I wish to go back to the character of Mayela and the question of her ethnic coding in the novel. During the whole course of *If I Die in Juárez*, Mayela is the only character explicitly coded as "Indian." Nevertheless, the narration lacks any concrete signifiers of her culture besides a passing mention of their outstanding talent in distance running, "She was healthy and athletic, a fast runner in the tradition of the great

Tarahumara distance runners, who were known to run, without tiring, from sun to moon over rough mountain terrain" (Duarte, 2008, 108). Duarte clearly decided for one of her characters to be a *Tarahumara* based on the long and rich history of this particular community and their demographic presence as the largest ethnic community in the state of Chihuahua ("*Pueblos Indígenas de la Sierra Tarahumara"*, n.d., pp. 2-5). Significantly, some news sources indicate that a large migration of *Tarahumaras* to Juárez took place in the last decade due to poverty and severe droughts (Cano, 2002). In addition, the increase of drug-related violence in the last eight years substantiates the likelihood of Duarte's scenario (Salmon, 2008). Nonetheless, the absence of any specific cultural references to *Tarahumara* culture in the representation of Mayela, and the fact that the spaces of Montenegro and Chitlitipin are fictional, illustrate how she serves as a cypher. In other words, and throughout the novel, "*Tarahumara*" is an empty name, synonymous with "Indian" and "The Other" rather than a concrete and nuanced historically identity. This elaboration of a raw, empty, Indigeneity resolves in a problematic way. Huddleston, the white doctor working in the orphanage, discovers that Mayela holds a prodigious talent for painting. Rumors of an Indian painter (later nicknamed as "la niñita Frida" [Duarte, 2008, p. 220], a reference to legendary painter Frida Kahlo) spread throughout Juárez and leads to Lafarge, the French wife of Miramontes, wanting to meet and financially support Mayela in her career. Thus, Mayela becomes the key to save Petra, since she represents one of the missing links (the other is Evita) that ties the multiple threads of the novel together. Despite the fact that Mayela is never physically kidnapped or raped, the implications of her position as an exoticised Indian painter exhibit the imperialistic gaze of the white characters who become the saviors of this girl from the Third World. Although the whole scenario seems manipulative and improbable, we need to remember that European patronage of Native

Americans has a long history[30]. Unfortunately, the narrative only hints at the historical and political implications of this form of objectification. In the end, the conclusion suggests that this path is the only possible escape for Mayela and her only chance in accessing a better way of life.

On the opposite spectrum, Petra, the brown *mestiza* character, represents the only one of the main characters who uses Indigenous rituals as sites of resistance. In a recurrent motif throughout the novel, Petra remembers the oral legacy of her grandmother, Teodora, and, in particular, the ritual of saluting the sun that she learned from the *Tarahumaras* ("Sing, Petra, sing to the morning" [Duarte, 2008, p. 65]), which they enact through the recitation of "The Creator and a New Day" a poem authored by *Tarahumara* composer and singer, Martín "Makawi" Chávez Ramírez. In several pivotal moments in Petra's chapters, the poem appears in complete bilingual form (in *Rarámuri* and Spanish languages). In a superficial reading, the poem functions as a prayer that expresses the connections with nature and spirituality:

> *Iwéra rega chukú kéti ono* (Be strong father son)
>
> *Mápu tamí mo nesériga iináro sinibísi rawé* (you who daily care for us.)
>
> *Ga'la kaníliga bela ta semáribo* (Those who live on earth are living well)
>
> *Si'néame ka o'mána wichimoba eperéame* (We continue giving strength to our father,)
>
> *Népi iwérali bela ta ásibo* (who fills our days with energy and light…)
>
> *Kéti ono mápu tamí neséroga iináro ne* (Thus I will sing…)
>
> *Echiregá bela ne nimí wikaráme ru* (to you who daily care for me.)

[30] For a recent finding that exemplifies this phenomenon of patronage, see *Pablo Tac, indigenous scholar writing on Luiseño language and colonial history, c. 1840* (Haas, 2011). Pablo Tac was a Luiseño Indigenous scholar who spend almost a decade in Rome where he extensively wrote about the Luiseño language and Indigenous culture from Alta California under the patronage of the Pope.

Mápu mo tamí nesériga chukú sinibísi rawé (Thus will I give strength)

Echiregá bela ne nimí iwérali ásima ru (so you will not be discouraged.)

Mápu ketási mo sewéka inárima siníbisi rawé (With all your strength)

Népi iwériga bela mo nesérima ru (care for those you have created)

Mápu iki uchúchali a'li ko mo alewá aale (and given the breath of life)

(Duarte, 2008, pp. 262-263)

As the central motif of the story, the poem collapses all of the different themes and discourses of the three main characters. It is the site where the elements of a Chicana Indigeneity become transparent. In one layer of meaning, the poem symbolizes the space of Montenegro as a matriarchal and Indigenous space holding an emotional meaning for Petra. At the same time, however, the continuous references to the "father sun" and allusions to "light" also serve to "otherize" Juárez. When Petra leaves Montenegro with her family, the pure and uncontaminated light of the village transforms into the dark and unknown space of Juárez, "She gazed out of the window and looked for the sun, singing the ancient song in her head. They were traveling north, the sun at her right shining dimly" (Duarte, 2008, p. 65). In this context, Juárez is the antitethical space to Montenegro and the narration constructs the city as a dangerous and organic living thing, foreshadowing the cruel torture that Petra will experience by the end of the novel, "She didn't tell anyone, but a sudden, overwhelming fear seized her… Something was there– waiting for her" (p. 66). This evident opposition, between the pure luminosity of Montenegro and the dark undertones of Juárez, reifies itself through the dichotomy of a matriarchal Indigeneity (Teodora and the use of the poem) and the actions of the killers and misogynistic men of Juárez, like Miramontes and Sebastián, which the narration connects to the patriarchal legacy of Aztec rituals of sacrifice and war.

For instance, *El Cucuy*[31], one of the killers and main henchman of Miramontes, imagines himself as the God of War, "*Huitzilopochtli*, who donned their victims' skin and danced exuberant, feasting on their blood" (Duarte, 2008, p. 307). In similar terms, during her torture, Petra experiences nightmares where Miramontes takes the form of el *tsahuatsan* (a mytical creature present in the legends of the *Zoque* people in Chiapas) that Duarte relocates to Montenegro, "the huge serpent with seven heads that roamed the mountains of Montenegro looking for prey… The hideous heads of *el tsahuatsan* all bore the face of Agustín Miramontes Guzmán" (p. 308). Furthermore, in an early scene, Petra's obsession with the figure of Miramontes parallels Sebastián's supernatural power over Cina, "Agustín's presence had been like a *magnet* for Petra; she was startled by *his power* [emphasis added] to reduce her to helplessness" (p. 254). In many ways, all of these moments in *If I Die in Juárez* indicate that Duarte embeds in Anzaldúa's framework of Chicana Indigeneity. However, this particular ethno-ideology unfolds in questionable ways when applied to the development of Petra as a character.

Of the three main characters of the novel, Petra is the only one who manages to ascend in the social and economic hierarchy of Juárez through her work in the *maquila*. However, her transformation into a modern woman ostracizes her from her family and Antonio, her fiancée from Montenegro, "Look at the way these women dress. I hope I never catch you dressing like that" (Duarte, 2008, p. 207). In other words, Petra's access to social and economic mobility and her embodiment of a more independent sexuality becomes a symbolic point of no return; the fracture with the experience of Montenegro. However, this process comes with a dilemma: the fact that she can access a new economic status only by becoming a sexual commodity. Gustavo Ríos, friends with

[31] *El Cucuy* is the Latin American version of the Boogeyman. Thus, the character functions in a universal and localized context.

Petra's family and manager of a *maquila*, gives Petra access to a new life, but only because he is sexually obsessed with her. "Petra felt an impulse to tell Gustavo what she really thought of him–he had made her dependent on him, and she hated him for it" (p. 208). Duarte makes a strong critique about the illusory implications of the modernization of women in the Third World as the result of neoliberalism. Thus, in this case, the supposed liberation of women by virtue of gaining economic power only serves to reproduce heteropatriarchal discourses and dependency on men. And yet, for Duarte, the moment where Petra's identity fracture occurs when her grandmother, Teodora, realizes that Petra lost her spirituality, "she knew that in Juárez the ancient traditions of Montenegro didn't exist" (p. 263). Because Duarte is incapable of resolving, or presenting a more nuanced critique, the complex issue of women's gaining of economic status in the age of transglobal capital and contemporary sexist discourses, the novel ends with a predictable narrative of spiritual prayer as a site of survival. On the border of life and death, her body ravished for many days and left like garbage in the desert, Petra miraculously survives when she embraces in symbolic terms the teachings of her grandmother, "Abuela Teodora put her hand tenderly on Petra's shoulder, and they walked out together to the mountains of Montenegro" (p. 318). Thus, in Duarte's envisioning of the Borderlands, the only path for survival means the return to idealized forms of Indigenous female epistemologies. In other words, the symbolic transformation of (dark) Juárez into the pure (light) space of Montenegro occurs by revisting the *Rarámuri* poem.

In similar fashion to Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood,* the spaces of resistance and healing in Duarte's project heavily emphasize the questions and issues of Chicana feminism and a nostalgic longing for a lost Indigenous past. Still, of all the fictional works analyzed thus far, *If I Die in Juárez* constitutes the most important text in political

and ideological terms. Although Duarte's novel fails in its project of Indigenous representation, the text fills a void that permeates all fictional works set on Juárez (from Bolaño to Gaspar de Alba): the migration of *Tarahumaras* and other Indian communities to Ciudad Juárez. In what ways do the patterns of Indigenous migration in Juárez intersect with feminicides and the *maquila* industry? Research, data, and artistic projects on these issues are urgently needed and, for better or worse, Duarte's novel represents a fitting starting point to increase awareness of this sociopolitical and historical void.

THE (IM)POSSIBILITIES OF A HEMISPHERIC CHICANA CONSCIOUSNESS

The question of how Chicana feminism can be translated into a transnational or transborder consciousness in the global South has plagued and troubled Chicana fiction and research for quite some time, particularly when the possibility of forming gender coalitions across borders is founded on the existence of a shared Indigeneity. In "Topographies of Indigenism," Lourdes Alberto (2012) uses Ana Castillo's *Mixquiahuala Letters* to problematize the implications of Chicana feminism and, in particular, Anzaldua's new *mestiza* consciousness, "the invisible legacy of colonization has been incorporated into Chicana feminist epistemologies and is continually deployed to silence indigenous subjects" (p. 50). This epistemic impossibility is exhibited to a painful degree in both *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez*, albeit in two contrasting forms. The former dislocates the agency of Mexican women through a *queer* Chicana rereading of Juárez, while the latter silences and demonizes Indigenous men through the critique of First World feminism. In both cases, the fictionalization of Juárez reveal the symbolic challenges that the subject of the Nation-State needs to transcend in order to strip himself or herself of specific and localized modes of oppression.

The intentions behind this chapter are not to question the existence or the possibilities of transnational coalitions. Since Gaspar de Alba organized the first binational conference in UCLA around the murders of Juárez in 2003, new and important international networks of female support erupted in both sides of the border. In contrast, the center of my critique resides in questioning, beyond the limits of pragmatic and political action, whether or not Chicana feminist epistemologies are capable of articulating the nuances of the sociopolitical reality in Juárez in a single transborder consciousness. In *Ethnonationalism*, Walker Connor (1994) questions the geographical presuppositions of hemispheric unity, which "predicate a mystical bond arising from an equally mystical proximity" (p. 120). If we extend this thesis into the metaphor of the Nation-State and the illusion of nationalism, then Benedict Anderson's (1996) claim is particularly meaningful: "All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives" (p. 204). Just like a mythical unity brought by land or the constructed narrative of the "Nation," Chicana feminism and Indigeneity presupposes the flattening of difference and ethnicity in a single continuum of sexism, oppression, and liminal neocolonialism. On the contrary, the fictional constructions of Juárez reveal that this continuum will always be limited by the subjectivity of the mediator, that is, the writers of these novels. Thus, instead of viewing the fictional representations of Juárez as accurate portrayals of the city of Juárez, we should, perhaps, analyze them as entry points to a particular *understanding* of ethnopolitics of identity.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* diverge in many aspects. And yet, both novels conclude in almost identical terms: Both stories end with the kidnapping and torture of one of the main female characters, as well as their subsequent rescue thanks to the efforts of an extensive network of female

(and sometimes male) bi-national support. Even though the novels function in very different genres (a coming-of-age story and a detective novel), the two authors resort to forms of excessive melodrama[32] and a fixation in providing some sort of catharsis[33] to the reader. Thus, the resolutions of *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez*, for better or worse, disclose a particular set of *projections*, of particular epistemological constructions, that Chicana writers unwillingly impose on the subaltern women of Juárez. Throughout the novels, Duarte and Gaspar de Alba expose their ideological frustrations and personal experiences by attempting to understand the extreme sexual violence of the feminicides. And yet, there is a fundamental gap, the lack of self-realization in an unavoidable complicatedness in overexposing or privileging certain discourses over others. As Spivak (1999) pointed out, "we take our goodwill for our guarantee" (p. 177), never questioning our position and ideological responsabilities as the architects of particular visions. In consequence, we need to seriously consider and problematize the production, reception, and larger political goals of these texts.

[32] Linda Williams (1998) describes melodrama as the foundational genre of American mass culture, "In melodrama there is a moral, wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice that gives American popular culture its strength and appeal as the powerless yet virtuous seek to return to the innocence of their origins" (p. 48).

[33] Compare this to the grim and even nihilistic fiction on Juárez produced by Latin American or Mexican writers (as in the case of Roberto Bolaño's *2666* or the plays of Hugo Rascón Banda and Virginia Hernández) who resort to open-ended stories or despondent narratives.

Chapter 3

Mexican Detectives and Chicana Journalists: Film Representations of Juárez

On August 20th, 2002, the PBS network premiered, as part of their renowned POV selection, the documentary *Señorita Extraviada* (*Missing Young Woman*). Directed by acclaimed Chicana filmmaker, Lourdes Portillo, the film centered on the experiences and struggles of the mothers of the murdered women in Juárez and the sociopolitical effects of feminicide in the early and late 1990s. Although *Señorita Extraviada* was not the first time Juárez and the murders became a subject of broadcast journalism[34], the film turned into a crucial document in bringing the phenomenon of feminicide to a U.S. mainstream public. In many ways, the mesmerizing and gripping nature of the documentary comes from the unusual visual approach that Portillo chose to tell the story: use of low-quality television footage of the murders; shots of women painting black and pink crosses in streetlights; ominous shots of the Juárez desert, the *maquilas* and the dunes of Chihuahua; blurry close-ups of young girls and shots of pictures, flyers, and newspapers showing the faces of disappeared women. In several moments of the documentary, the camera gazes at a TV showing news footage. The effect is strange and disorienting: we watch a screen watching a screen showing images of bodies and crime scenes. This creates multiple layers of distance, which secure our position and detachment from the objects in the screen.

In *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) traces the turning point of film language in the discovery of *montage*, "Whether in film or photography,

[34] Numerous international news networks covered the murders in the late 90s, such as CNN, BBC and BBC London just to name a few. Additionally, other documentaries would follow after the successful premiere of Portillo's film. The most well-known are *Bajo Juárez* (2006) and *Border Echoes/Ecos de una frontera* (2006).

montage was created in the existing suite or dark room rather than on location. The artificiality of the technique asked spectators to question what it was that they were being shown and to extend that skepticism to more 'realistic' images" (p. 15). In many ways, documentaries represent the most prominent example of "realism" in film. Because this genre shows footage of real people and places, audiences receive and encode the images as actual representations of the outside world even when the power of montage (the editing of the "story" as presented by the director) creates a logical narrative with a clear linear structure. Thus, viewers believe in the veracity of the story, to an extent, despite the fact that the audience is witnessing a mediated narrative. As a consequence, we need to consider the visual representations of Juárez as the most prominent materials for understanding the process in which the feminicides entered the realm of universal infamy. This is not to say that textual representations are less important or influential, but rather how the "sensual dimension" (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 15) of film produces a completely different effect in the audience. In this sense, documentaries such as *Señorita Extraviada* or the controversial photographs in Charles Bowden's *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (1998) mark the moment where the cases acquired a more immediate and morbid dimension. Juárez stopped being an abstract textual construction and transformed into something concrete and tangible. Thus, these documents reproduced and constructed a *visual imaginary*, that is, a series of identifiable motifs and images (pink crosses, pictures of women, images of desert, and so on), which became inherently attached to the city of Juárez.

For these reasons, the last chapter of my research centers on film representations of Juárez. By far the most mainstream form of visual culture, film provides complex examples of the recurrent issues I grappled with in the previous chapters: mediated perspectives, ideological discourses embedded in cultural representations of the

feminicides, and the architecture of fiction. In following the transnational framework of previous sections, this chapter focuses on two films developed on each side of the border in different contexts. On one side, Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* (2006) was produced in the U.S. through independent financing, albeit with the presence and support of Amnesty International and a cast of recognizable Hollywood stars. Carlos Carrera's *Backyard/El Traspatio* (2009), on the other hand, received financing of both the Mexican government and private sponsors. Both films share a lot of similarities with *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* in terms of themes, motifs, and ideological concerns. And yet, we cannot analyze these films in the same way that we understand literary texts. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, novels such as *Desert Blood* are embedded in an economic system of production. They exist as works of "art" and as commodities. Nonetheless, these "products" exist at the margins of mainstream culture: their content is mediated in very limited terms (publishing press, editor, and author) and they are directed to very particular audiences (since the number of printed copies tends to be small). Films, on the opposite end, require extensive logistics, a large staff, complex coordination (sometimes international or bi-national, as in the case of these movies), considerable budgets, and effective marketing campaigns. Thus, films are highly mediated by a different set of scalar conditions and factors, but they exist as potential products that can reach larger audiences. At the same time, literature and film are coded and articulated in very different levels of semiotic mediation. In literature, the reader reconstructs the incomplete textual space through his symbolic baggage. Film, on the opposite spectrum, attempts to mimic reality through a series of photographs that simulate movement. Then, music, montage, lightning, visual rhythm, and the performance of the actors form what we know as film language. How do these particular codes and systems construct the sensorial and symbollic environment of Juárez and the paradoxical discourse of feminicide?

BORDERTOWN: TRANSNATIONALISM, INDIGENEITY, AND THE LOSS OF IDENTITY

In 1998, acclaimed director Gregory Nava (*El Norte*, 1983; *Selena* 1997) approached long-time collaborator and friend, the mega-star Jennifer López, for a film project centered on the gruesome murders occurring in the U.S.-Mexico border, which, at the time, were reaching international headlines. It took eight more years in order for Nava to secure the funding for the film, which would eventually be titled *Bordertown*.

Due to the possibilities of physical threats and intimidation by the Juárez government, filming took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Nogales, Sonora (Johnson, 2007). Neither Nava nor López nor the international cast (including Antonio Banderas and Martin Sheen) visited Juárez during filming or supported the second-unit located on the border. This fact indicates a hierarchical value of labor: the crew working in Juárez risked their well-being, while the filmmakers and producers took the credit for the final work. The film had its world premiere in 2007 at the Berlin International Film Festival where it was heckled and only received a mild applause ("Bordertown' booed at the Berlinale," 2007), which, in terms of the audiences' reception of the work, exposes the heavy-handed and dishonest nature of the whole project. Notably, this event happened a day after López received the influential "Artists for Amnesty" award from Amnesty International who provided extensive support for the film. Overall, the conditions of the production and reception of the film reveal the jarring, contradictory, and muddy ways in which Hollywood film intersects with transnational activism. In the end, *Bordertown* premiered in Juárez amidst an unprecedented wave of violence in 2008. Some news outlets stated that activists and the mothers of the victims received death treats in order to prevent them from watching the finished film (*Frontera Norte Sur*, 2008). In the U.S., the film never got a wide release in theaters, was panned by critics, and went straight to the DVD market where it rapidly faded into obscurity.

The above chronology of events involves a very complex number of layers: the limits of international networks of supports, the contradictory nature of independent filmmaking; the problematic implications of privileged international stars or activists in engaging with victims of oppression in Latin America, and so on. However, the only object that matters in film is the final product, regardless of the conditions of production, and if it succeeds in creating a cohesive discourse on feminicide. Thus, we need a closer reading of how film language articulates the plot and themes of this film for different ideological projects. In the case of *Bordertown*, I explore the thematic construction of Indigeneity and the filmmakers' critique of transnational or assimilated identities.

Bordertown opens with the brutal rape of an Indigenous *maquila* worker, Eva Jímenez (Maya Zapata), who miraculously survives the event. Meanwhile this event takes place, a Chicago journalist, Lauren Adrien (Jennifer López), arrives to Juárez, under the instructions of her boss George Morgan (Martin Sheen), in order to research the strange murders that are plaguing the city. Adrien is an ambitious woman who only takes the job after George offers her an appealing position as an international correspondent. She claims having no knowledge of Spanish or having any interest in Mexico ("Nobody gives a shit about Mexico" [Nava, 2007]). However, her ambivalent perception of the U.S.-México border reveals a complicated history: at one point, Adrien worked in El Paso as a journalist and experienced a rupture with her colleague, Alfonso Díaz (Antonio Banderas), who remained in Juárez as the head of the local newspaper *El Sol de Juárez,* amidst continuous death threats and a fierce censorship campaign by the local authorities. Due to a clear lack of options, since the corruption of the Mexican police is rampant, Eva's family reaches out to Díaz for help. Through a number of circumstances, Adrien ends up protecting Eva while attempting to solve the puzzle behind the murders. Lauren's contact with Eva's Indigenous identity leads her to a complex reconciliation with her own

Mexican identity and her painful past as an orphan of immigrant farmworkers[35]. Thus, a cursory reading of *Bordertown* reveals that the film bears numerous parallels with both *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez*: questions of cultural assimilation, return to a lost identity, emphasis on the issue of immigration; critiques of the socioeconomical and colonialist legacies of the Borderlands, and a fixation with the mystical dimensions of Indigenous traditions. Nonetheless, the film's complicated production history, as well as the involvement of both Nava and López, gives the project an added dimension that we need to take into consideration.

In "Exposing the Juárez Murders," the "making-of" documentary of the film included in the DVD, Nava asserts that Jennifer López had large influence on the development of the script and the character of Lauren Adrien. This fact led to the labeling of the film as a vanity project and the beginning of Lopez's career downfall (Kelly, 2009). In her critique of Chicana transnationalism, Sadowski-Smith (2009) agrees with this assessment explaining how, "the film ends up reiterating the well-worn plot line of a hard-bitten First-World journalist finding spiritual redemption and self-awareness by exposure to, and empathy with, suffering in Third-World nations" (p. 82). And although I agree with every respect with this analysis, I believe that Sadowski-Smith's critique of the film has an important gap. True, negative criticism focused on Adrien character because she is a shallow and one-dimensional character. And yet, the reason why the movie failed at connecting with the audience was due to the visual presence of López. In terms of conceptualization of filmic illusion, López's presence adds a new layer to the semiotic dimension of *Bordertown*. In other words, we cannot obviate the existence of a megastar and diva in the filmic space because it exhibits the artificiality of the illusion we

[35] The film shows Adrien's past in a series of vague flashbacks. The second half of the film reveals how they were murdered while working in the fields. This event hints at the possibility that they were activists and, perhaps, supporters of the UFWA.

are watching. In other words, the mega-star persona of López disrupts the visual reading of the film and our emotional investment in the plot.

The semiotical alterations that specific forms of casting create in film are not a new phenomenon. A relevant example is Jonathan Demme's controversial adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1998), in particular, the presence of Oprah Winfrey as the main character and producer of the film. In her visual analysis of constructions of motherhood, Ruby C. Tapia (2011) argues that, "the figure of Winfrey facilitates the audience's critically unreflective feeling of resolution regarding the historical crimes of slavery and its legacy of the racialized exploitation and disruption of black women's sexual and reproductive capacities" (p. 87). In other words, the maternal figure of Winfrey and her status as an exceptional example of black entrepreneurship, in one way or another, influences the adaption of the film resulting in a diluting of an influential text that can, then, be easily digested by a mainstream audience. Thus, the presence of López in *Bordertown* functions in similar ways; particularly if we conceive the central role that López played in Nava's filmography. After all, we need to remember the initial uproar that took place after López, of Puerto Rican descent, was cast as Selena Quintanilla, the "Queen of Tex Mex" in *Selena*. Consequently, the controversy grounded not only questions of authenticity, but debates about the construction of transnational identities and the symbolic development of Latino/a identities. In her essay "Jennifer as Selena; Rethinking Latinidad in Media and Popular Culture," Frances Aparicio (2003) argues that, "The identification of Jennifer López with Selena, an individual one, as well as the potential identificatory process of Latino/a audiences with Selena and with Jennifer López… open up… the challenge of our demographic diversification and our interlatino dynamics and interactions" (p. 103). However, on many levels, *Bordertown* undermines most of this idyllic project of ethnic coalition. If *Selena* represented the intersection of

Puerto Rican and Mexico-Texan identitities, then *Bordertown* marks the symbolic transformation of López into a coded "Mexican"; a project started in *My Family* (1995) (where López played an American of Mexican descent) and that ends in the character of Adrien as a Mexican American who reconnects with her lost heritage via an Indigenous female migrant. Aparicio's argument is convincing if we take into consideration the impact of *Selena* and the eventual mainstream success of Lopez, but when placed in the context of the two other collaborations between the actress and Nava (and *Bordertown* in particular), it is clear that López film persona undermined any potential project of Latino racial diversity. In this context, there is no project of interethnic coalitions or transnational identities. Instead, we have the questionable legacies of a Chicano/a post-nationalism: the sociopolitical effects of the Chicano movement of the 1960s, the notions of cultural assimilation, and the identity fractures that result from the experience of having a brown body in the United States.

Before exploring the questions of transnationalism and the regaining of a lost identity, I want to briefly discuss the problematic Indigenous representation of the character of Eva, introduced for the first time in the context of a *maquila*. After leaving downtown alone, she is viciously attacked by a bus driver and another man. Due to the quick cuts in the composition of the scene, we do not see the brutal event in detail. However, the camera centers on Eva's face when the second mysterious rapist strangles her. The emotionless eyes and lack of movement indicate that she died. After a brief sequence on a plane that introduces Adrien's character, the film returns to the desert. In a nightmarish sequence, Eva rises from the sand. Because the earlier shot established her death, the scene acquires a miraculous and supernatural dimension. It is crucial to note, however, that up to this point in the plot, the film offers no discernible visual or symbolic

cues that could lead to the audience's deduction that Eva is Indigenous[36]. Even if the viewers had previous knowledge of the cases, the framing and external features of Maya Zapata (the actress playing Eva) would only indicate that the character fits with the narrative of the murders: A brown woman with black hair and black eyes working in a *maquila*. Thus, the fact that the film discloses Eva's ethnicity until after her rape means the filmmakers decided to transgress, or, at least, problematize, one of the most common narratives of the Juárez murders. The first hint of this important plot point appears a few scenes later after Adrien arrives Juárez.

The first shot that we have of Eva after the rape occurs in an interesting context. The film cuts to *La Anapra*, the *colonia* where Eva lives. The establishing shot centers on a small altar of the Virgin of Guadalupe (*La Virgen de Guadalupe*). Then, the scene cuts to the interior of one of the improvised huts of the *colonia* where Eva lays down in the ground surrounded by candles and other images of the Virgin. A *curandero* or shaman chants while performing a *limpia* (a cleansing ritual). Some scenes later, we see Eva and her family speaking in an Indigenous language about the rape[37]. However, besides these vague visual and linguistic references the film lacks any specificity on Eva's background. In this sense, the character's function is quite similar to Mayela's in *If I Die in Juárez*: a cypher for raw indigeneity in the context of NAFTA. Eva's symbolic role becomes clear

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[36] Neither the "making-of" nor the multiple interviews with Nava and López nor the film indicate the exact Indigenous background or language of Eva. It is worth nothing that the "special thanks" section in the end credits includes the Zia Pueblo of New Mexico. Although I have no evidence of this, I believe that the sequences in Eva's colonia were filmed on this reservation. This would mean that the minor characters of these sequences (the *curandero* and an unnamed woman) are Zia Pueblo Indians. Another vague clue that relates to this is the fictional newspaper of Díaz, *El Sol de Juárez* (The Sun of Juárez). The main symbol of the Zia pueblo is a sun, which bares some resemblance to the logo of the newspaper. This is a problematic dimension of the film because it exhibits how the filmmakers substituted one Indian for another without attending to the particular geography, culture, or tribal nation of that community.

[37] The DVD lacks an audio-commentary, so the film offers no background or specificity on Eva's language (or specific Indigenous culture). Existing interviews with Nava and the other actors also omit this information.

in a pivotal conversation that she has with Adrien. Eva explains that she emigrated from Oaxaca because her people lost their land, "We cannot pay the taxes, so they tells us, 'go to the border and work in the *maquiladoras*… Make money to keep your land" (Nava, 2007). Thus, Nava utilizes the issue of law sovereignty and Indigenous migration to question the contradictory implications of transglobal neoliberalism in Latin America by collapsing the localized[38] conditions of Eva's sociocultural background into a vague framework of Native American land struggles. It is likely that Nava decided to simplify the geopolitical conditions of Mexico's Indigenous communities in order to provide a more accessible context to American audiences.

Nava also uses Eva's character to exemplify forms of prejudice directed at Indigenous populations. After her rape, Eva, her family, and community believe that the second rapist was the Devil who possessed Eva. Other characters, like Teresa Casillas (Sonica Braga), an activist (a probable nod to Esther Chávez Cano) who hides Eva and Lauren from the police, remain skeptical throughout the film about the existence of a second rapist and, instead, claim that Eva suffers some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder or, worse, emotional distress as the effects of superstitious beliefs because she is Indian. Only Lauren accepts Eva's story, which becomes a site of conflict with Casillas who bluntly states, "[Eva] comes from an Indian culture. Her people often don't distinguish the real things from the things they imagine" (Nava, 2007). Thus, Nava uses

[38] The decision of making Eva an Indigenous migrant from Oaxaca is not arbitrary. The disruptions of land reform and, eventually, the signing of NAFTA forced many Indigenous communities (like the *Mixtec*) "to enter the process of migration to northern Mexico and the US, which reached massive dimensions in the mid-1980s" (Rivera Salgado, 1999, para. 2). And yet, the political conditions of Oaxaca have always remained unstable in the last 40 years, which could also be considered as factors that forced Eva and their family to leave their land. For instance, in the historical context of the film and the feminicides (late 1990s to mid-2000s), Oaxaca experienced a time of political distress as a consequence of rampant corruption, marginalization of the poor, and repressive actions of the state government. These precarious political conditions led to the notorious civil 2006 uprising against the governor of Oaxaca (Ulises Ruiz Ortiz) and the formation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) (Collective Reinventions, 2008).

this plot point to criticize stereotypical narratives of Indigenous beliefs as backwards, a layer that bears some connections with Eva's story of the loss of their land. In this logic of capitalist inequality, Indians or Native-Americans can only regain their sovereignty by inserting themselves in the logic of transglobal capital. Nonetheless, most of the symbolic connections between the beliefs of Indian cultures and the political effects of neoliberalism remain underdeveloped in the film. Instead, Eva's construction of the rapist as a supernatural being only functions as a gimmick to heighten the environment of horror (Eva imagines the murderer stalking her at night) or to artificially increase the audiences' empathy towards Adrien (the only character that believes in Eva). In this sense, Nava's political focus is always fixated in the consequences and cultural hierarchies embedded in transnational capitalism, which come full circle when Lauren meets the young Marco Antonio Salamanca (Juan Diego Botto), the son of an influential family in Juárez' and manager of a *maquila*.

Casillas takes Lauren and Eva to the *quinceañera* of Felipe Salamanca's daughter. Marco attempts to seduce Lauren by promising to show her "a different side" of Juárez (Nava, 2007). Lauren eventually accepts the invitation because Marco possesses some information about Eva's rapist. During the date, Marco describes his privileged transnational identity to Lauren as an upper-class Mexican with an U.S. education, "It's very convenient, I can be Mexican whenever I want, or American" (Nava, 2007). The conversation also functions to differentiate the experience of Lauren as someone who could only access a privileged U.S. citizen status as an adopted child. Still, the themes and issues of this conversation repeat at the end of the film, when Lauren discovers the role of the Salamanca family in silencing the coverage of the crimes. Lauren confronts him inside a *maquila*, the literal space of transnational labor, "Do you believe in anything? What are you? Mexican? Are you American? What are you?" Salamanca

retorts in the logics of an illusory and fabricated transglobal logic, "Mexican, American… these are very limiting terms. They don't mean much in our modern world" (Nava, 2007). Both of these sequences represent the most effective moments in the film and a poignant critique of NAFTA and neoliberal discourses that privilege certain forms of migratory patterns over others. Nonetheless, Nava fails at translating this problematizing of transnational identity to Lauren's relationship with Eva, since his critique is only limited to upper-class owners of big businesses.

Returning to Eva's function in the film, Nava is incapable of individualizing Eva's experience because she only serves a thematic function: she is the symbolic bridge to Lauren's lost identity, which places the character within a similar fracture of identity as Ivon in *Desert Blood*. Several moments allude to this with a noticeable lack of subtlety: when Lauren impersonates a *maquila* worker (in order to find the guilty bus driver), Eva helps her in disguising as a Mexican woman, "Now you look like me", Eva states (Nava, 2007). Lauren's emotional development comes to a close the moment when she confesses to George the truth of her history as an orphan of Mexican workers. Thus, she sees herself in the women of Juárez, "when I met Eva I saw myself" (Nava, 2007). Thus, Lauren creates a shift in discourse that allows for an artificial intersectionality of interethnic coalitions: Lauren, and by extension López, realizes that she experienced a similar type of racial oppression. As a woman of color, she also embodies the women of Juárez. Naturally, the filmmakers gloss over the questionable political implications of this symbolic move. In her criticism of the film, Sadowski-Smith (2009) correctly asserts how, "the film glosses over Lauren's immense economic and cultural privileges as a U.S. citizen… that have allowed her to choose a path unavailable to Eva and that would have largely sheltered her from the status of a femicide victim" (p. 82). Despite these problematic dimensions, the film's conclusion avoids one of the ideological traps of

Desert Blood. Instead of returning to the safety of the United States (like the character of Ivon), Adrien decides to stay in Juárez and continues the investigative reporting of Díaz after he is murdered (Sadowski-Smith, 2009). This act of relinquishing the privileges and comfort of a life in the United States obviates the extra-diegetic conditions of López's performance and Hollywood persona. In the end, just like Gaspar de Alba's novel, the story of Adrien configures a Chicana wish-fulfillment narrative of a return to an imaginary lost past enacted as a salvation of both the Other and the Self.

Backyard/El Traspatio: Genre Conventions and Political Discourse

I clearly remember how at the end of 2008, amidst the relentless increase in drug-related violence, a trailer for a Mexican film would always appear with other typical Hollywood "movie trailers" showing the new inconsequential horror or romantic production of the Dream Factory. The name of this particular Mexican production was *Backyard/El Traspatio* (2009) and the trailer stated in big bold letters that this was the new film of Carlos Carrera, the acclaimed director of the controversial box-office hit *The Crime of Father Amaro* (2002). In an interesting marketing strategy, the trailer never mentioned that it was set in Juárez or based on the infamous murders. Instead, the images only mentioned in vague terms that it was "Based on true events." As with many other big budget Mexican films, it premiered the following year with mixed reviews and it disappeared from the billboards in a few weeks.

Backyard remains the only Mexican mainstream attempt at bringing the issue of feminicide to the national spotlight. Premiering just one year after the controversial release of *Bordertown*, the film was the product of an interesting and questionable mixture of federal and private financing. At the same time, the artistic group behind the

creation and the development of the project featured a diverse and recognizable team of influential artists. Besides Carrera's involvement, the film's script was written by the acclaimed feminist playwright, Sabina Berman (*Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda*), and produced by Epigmenio Ibarra of *Argos Comunicación* (*Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*). The film received direct funding from the Mexican government and a diverse group of sponsorships, including *Grupo Inbursa* (a bank owned by Mexican multi-billionaire Carlos Slim), *Coppel* (a chain of department stores), *Volaris* (an airline), and *E-Pura* (a brand of purified water). In her 2012 dissertation on feminide and human empathy, Lydia Cristina Huerta Moreno summarizes the reception of the film in the following way, "The press critiqued the film for its plethora of characters, lack of argument, and false intentionality to represent something other than what it was: fiction" (p. 111). Nonethelees, and despite the cold reception, the film produced some nuanced responses. For instance, Luis Tovar's (2009) review of the film in his column in *La Jornada Semanal* critiqued the film's overuse of tropes found in police films, but concluded[39] that, "up until now this is the most honest and blunt film project–in full-length fiction–that has been done about the murdered women of Juárez" (para. 5). This comment exemplifies the pitfalls in understanding the film, mainly the fact that the viewer needs to grapple with two competing readings: *Backyard* as a genre film versus the film as a cohesive comment on the effects and origins of feminicide. In this sense, it is not so much a question of clashing discourses, but how both interpretations exist within the plot.

[39] "La riqueza de la historia y la inclusión de ciertos personajes, por ejemplo un locutor radiofónico erigido en voz de la sociedad civil, daban para un ejercicio más complejo y más alejado del cliché de la policía justiciera solitaria, que le hubiera venido muy bien a ésta que, no obstante, es hasta ahora la propuesta fílmica más honesta y claridosa –en largo de ficción– que se hace en torno al tema de las asesinadas de Juárez" (Tovar, 2009, para. 5).

Backyard follows two major plotlines, which function as an elaborate combination of fictional and real elements. The first concerns Captain Blanca Bravo (Ana de la Reguera), a newcomer police officer to Juárez, who fails in her attempts to find a clear culprit of the murders. Her investigation follows the events that transpired in Juárez in the late 1990s: the capture of an Egyptian suspect (Abdalah Haddah/Latif Sharif), the finding of several bodies in an empty lot (the case of *El Campo Algodonero*), and the police involvement in fabricating confessions and evidence (relative to the imprisonment and torture of the gang *Los Cheros*, the fictional version of *Los Rebeldes* gang). The second plot thread centers on the tragic story of Juana, a *Tzeltal* Indigenous woman who arrives to Juárez after the death of her father. Both plots merge in the conclusion, representing two separate sociopolitical registers: Blanca's story reconstructs the responses of political, economic, and law-enforcement institutions to the murders, while Juana's represents an on-the-ground example of the ramifications of misogynistic violence in Juárez. Another important aspect of this differentiation between the narratives occurs at the level of genre: while the investigation follows the tropes of detective stories, thrillers and neo-noir films, Juana's story falls into particular formulas of melodrama and immigration narratives. Thus, my main interest in the film derives not in the ways that the story fictionalizes the well-known signifiers of Juárez into formulas or clichés of crime films, but rather how the fictional elements transgress the limits of film genres and shape them into a very cohesive political discourse of feminicide and mysoginistic violence.

In his criticism of the social implications of film genres, Jean Loup Bourget (2012) asserts that "[g]enre conventions can be either used as an alibi (the implicit meaning is to be found elsewhere in the film) or turned upside down (irony underlines the conventionality of the convention)" (p. 76). *Backyard* provides an interesting example of the use of genre conventions as extreme opposites. In other words, Carrera and Berman,

much like Gaspar de Alba, follow the tropes of detective fiction for practical and ideological reasons. By using the structure of a police investigation, Blanca's plot provides a comprehensive fictionalized map of the well-known facts of the case: the arrest of Haddad aka *El Sultan* (Latif Sharif), a police raid in order to capture *The Cheros* gang (*Los Rebeldes*), the possibility of a serial killer from El Paso (the businessman Mickey Santos, in the context of the film), and the discovery of an underground freezer in the desert (a reference to the *narcofosas* or hidden pits with hundreds of bodies). Because Blanca just arrived to Juárez, her character unravels the complex puzzle of the city at the same time as the audience. And yet, the structure of the film and Blanca's status as a female police officer allows the inclusion of racial and sexual issues that remain absent from other textual representations of Juárez. For instance, Blanca's position as a recently arrived policewoman from Mexico's capital enables Carrera and Berman to exhibit the ways that patriarchal and heteronormative discourses permeate the politico-legal institutions of Juárez. Without even realizing it, Blanca becomes a pawn in the corrupt game of masculinist politics controlled by the sexist Lieutenant (Alejandro Calva) of the Juárez police and the ultra-conservative Governor (Enoc Leaño) of Chihuahua. Blanca simultaneously represents, by virtue of her gender, a threat and a political tool staged in the first on-screen conversation between Blanca and the Lieutenant, "Listen, Blanca. I didn't graduate from the Mexico City police academy, but here in Juárez, I got plenty of tricks up my sleeve. Put them behind bars and in four hours their super lawyers will have them out in no time" (Carrera, 2009)[40]. The Lieutenant's condescending attitude establishes a clear hierarchy: Blanca is naïve, and even though she is a cop from the biggest city in the world, she remains an outsider of the reality of Juárez. This tense

[40] All the English quotes from the film, which is entirely in Spanish, were transcribed from the subtitles of the R1-DVD. In some cases, however, I slightly altered the translation in order to include some nuances of the original dialogue that were lost in the official English subtitles.

relationship reaches a full-blown confrontation when Blanca, while scouting the desert, saves a young woman (Rosa, played by Cecilia Bueno) who was being raped in a car. The rapists throw the woman in the desert while fleeing the scene, which prompts Blanca to help her instead of continuing the pursuit. This decision ignites the anger of the Lieutenant, "You didn't think, you felt! That's why women make good nurses and bad cops" (Carrera, 2009). This conversation provides a poignant representation of the gender binaries and sexist stereotypes that permeate Juárez authorities: women are weaker and less efficient than men because they appeal to *emotion* rather than reason. The fact that this oppressive discourse occurs in the context of a hierarchical space (the police) serves also to exposes the institutionalization of patriarchy in Mexico.

The plot thread of the rape survivor eventually leads to an interesting series of events related to the unnamed Governor of Chihuahua. In a surprisingly nuanced decision, the film avoids portraying the Governor as a cartoonish villain. In his first scene, the Governor discusses the increasing media coverage of the murders with a Japanese *maquila* owner. After hanging up the phone, the Governor expresses empathy towards the victims and critiques the decision of the *maquilas* to register a death woman as a "negative detail" (Carrera, 2009) from the daily assembly production. Nonetheless, this positive moment is contrasted with his later characterization as an ambitious man wanting to ascend the political hierarchy of Mexico and a tendency to bend to the whims of foreign investors. However, the most important detail places him in the Cathedral of Chihuahua, indicating his Catholic faith and conservative leanings. This trivial fact comes at the end of the film, when the Governor threatens to incarcerate Blanca because she dared to convince Rosa, the rape survivor, of aborting the baby that resulted from her brutal rape: "[Y]ou took her with a women who offered her a job and shelter with the condition that she would abort… you practically forced her to kill her own baby"

(Carrera, 2009). Here, the filmmakers intersect the sociocultural issues of reproductive control and the limited options that poor women have when faced with societal and cultural systems of gender surveillance, the best example being religion. In any case, the Governor uses this fact, more than Blanca's inability to solve the murders, to start a legal case against the officer.

With a different ideological layer, the Governor also displays the sheer contempt many Mexican elected officials exhibit for the demands of civil society, especially in an environment where the press can be bought or silenced with ease. For instance, DJ Peralta (Joaquín Cosío), a leftist radio-host that becomes a recurrent character and indirect narrator of the film, urges his listeners to reach the state capitol and use their car horns to stop the Governor from demoting Blanca from the case. The sound becomes so loud, that the Governor is forced to stop the hearing and watch the protest from a balcony. He sardonically explains to his assistant, "How many people would you say? A hundred? Three hundred? How many people are peacefully at home this Saturday watching TV? The ones who matter trust we'll do what it takes to keep the peace" (Carrera, 2009). In one swift and blunt move, Carrera exposes the illusory limits of Mexican democracy where activism and media cannot exercise political change under the extreme system of political corruption and the hierarchies of power in Mexican politics. At the same time, this moment exposes the pessimism permeating contemporary Mexican films. If *Bordertown* supports the development of transnational coalitions, then *Backyard* states the futility of mainstream media (and, by extension, activism) in the context of a corrupt Nation-State.

Despite the presence of these effective moments in *Backyard*, the film reproduces the same prejudices and stereotypical discourses that we come to expect from any representation of the feminicides. In this sense, the film, in some respects, is no less

problematic or controversial than *Bordertown*. After all, both use the same genre conventions (thriller, detective and crime fiction tropes) and devolve into the usual narratives of serial killers and supernatural violence. In Bourget's framework, a film can deploy genre conventions as a political "alibi": pretending to question these formulas, while reproducing the political discourses within them. Carrera's film functions in an interesting way because the conclusion turns the genre conventions upside down. During the last third of the film, and just moments before the hearing with the Governor, Blanca realizes that the case transcends her intellectual capacities. She goes to Peralta's house and they discuss all the different theories behind the murders. Instead of reaching any form of conclusion, they simply go back and forth through all plausible explanations. Thus, all the events of the film up to this point were simply a reenactment and fictional reencoding of the existent hypothesis on the murders, while refusing to provide a clear culprit. A fact that effectively transgresses the traditional structure of crime films. At the end, Blanca states, "it could be any of those theories or all of them at once" (Carrera, 2009). Then, Peralta asks, "And what are the facts, Blanca?" She simply answers, "Murder a woman in Juárez, throw her into the desert and you have a license to kill." (Carrera, 2009). If we follow this ethos of violence, in the context of Blanca's plot thread, we are ultimately left with a nihilistic narrative of endless death. Blanca's conclusion provides evidence of this interpretation: the officer flees to El Paso before the authorities of Juárez incarcerate her, but she achieves some sort of justice through illegal means. After gathering enough evidence, she decides to murder Mickey Santos (Jimmy Smits), an El Paso businessman who has a deal with the Juárez police that allows him to rape young girls with impunity. Even though Blanca escapes and saves a young girl before she is raped, it is clear that the murders will continue. Thus, the endless cycle of violence continues and the audience is only left with a clumsy attempt at catharsis.

In spite of this evidence, I want to propose an alternative reading to the above conclusion. If we take Blanca's plot thread in isolation, only a pessimistic conclusion can be reached. However, when we take the major plotline of the investigation alongside the story of Juana, the Indian *maquila* worker, the film acquires a much more complex dimension. The simplicity of Juana's story is deceiving. She migrates to Juárez to live with her cousin, Márgara (Amorita Rasgado), and soon after she has access to a whole different experience thanks to her work in the assembly plant. Thus, Márgara introduces Juana to a sexual and economic liberation free from the rules, traditions, and poverty of their village. Then, she meets Cutberto, another young *Tzeltal* from Oaxaca. Their relationship develops in a healthy way, but Cutberto's fixation with the ways of their land (only having sex after marriage and following the traditions of their village) leads to Juana dating other men, which ignites the anger and jealousy of Cutberto. Influenced by a dangerous group of misogynistic men, Cutberto kidnaps and rapes Juana. He soon realizes that the men only used him to reach Juana. In the chilling conclusion, the group rapes Juana in a van while they force Cutberto, at gunpoint, to suffocate her with a plastic bag. Significantly, this series of events occur after a discussion between the group and Cutberto about the issue of feminicide. In a clever twist, the men repeat the sexist statements that the Juárez government used to downplay the phenomenon of the murders of women in the border, "Dead men tripled raped women, and there's no police raids… Besides what city doesn't have dead men and women?" Another member of the group bluntly states, "Reverse sexism, *cabrón"* (Carrera, 2009). When Cutberto attempts to defend the women and question the murders he is "otherized" as an Indian, that is, an outsider. For example, they nickname him, "Oaxaca", indicating his rural upbringing and racial inferiority. This moment provides a stereotypical representation of Indianness: Cutberto is characterized as naïve, simple, and gullible because of his traditional culture

and attitudes.[41] Thus, the development and conclusion of the character functions in a similar way to the male Indigenous characters of *If I Die in Juárez* where a legacy of patriarchal hegemony "contaminates" the legacy and traditions of Indigenous men. The film also presents the issue of women's sexual liberation in similar fashion to the character of Petra in Duarte's novel), but the film cannot resolve the contradictory discourse of traditional values and sexual liberation as an effect of urban neoliberal spaces.

Nonetheless, and even alongside this simplistic representation of Indigenous identity, the conclusion of this conversation between Cutberto and the men about the murderers produces one of the most poignant and powerful moments of all the texts on Juárez analyzed thus far. After a night of partying, the group retreats with Cutberto, to the house of one of the men. The camera pans the small house and shows the mother of one of the men serving the group sitting in a table. One of the men angrily screams to a girl in a back room and demands that she must help her grandmother in the kitchen. Thus, in just a few brief shot, Carrera configures this domestic space as a site of complete patriarchal control. Finally, the camera follows with a close-up to the face of one man wearing sunglasses who proceeds to give Cutberto a terrifying ultimatum regarding Juana's betrayal, "That woman disgraced you. So now you got two choices: *like seeing yourself double in these shades*. You see yourself double? You forgive her and keep moaning or you don't forgive shit and quit being such a fag." (Carrera, 2009) While the man utters these words, the gaze of the camera focuses on the sunglasses showing the reflection of Cutberto (see Figure 1). In film language, the audience has access to the actors' (and characters) state of mind and the psychology of their characters. By obscuring or hiding

[41] The stereotype of the guileless and naive Indian was popularized during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema in films such as *Tizoc* (1957), which provided an idealized vision of Indigenous servitude.

the eyes of the murderer, Carrera turns him into an empty cypher. Just like the imagined faceless murderers of women in Juárez, the film encodes a nameless and indefinite violence. Furthermore, the partially obscured face of this anonymous character parallels our partial understanding of the murders. Even though we have complete access to the information and cold facts of the feminicides, the full picture remains elusive. As if we are gazing over an endless rabbit hole.

Fig. 1: The unnamed killer gazes at Cutberto and the audience.

Source: Carrera, C. (2009). *Backyard*. Mexico: Tardan/Berman, FOPROCINE, Argos Comunicación.

Without a doubt, the moment feels unreal: the artificiality of the dialogue and the reflection of Cutberto suggest a breaking of the fourth wall. Thus, we gazed upon a mirror image that reflects our voyeuristic. In other words, the Manichean question that the man produces is directed also at us: on what side are you? What would you do in a similar situation? Through this visual technique, the film exposes our complicity in a system of power. At the same time, this scene provides a multi-layered comment on the question of masculinities. The full sequence goes beyond the mere notion of peer

pressure, since Cutberto's status as an Indian in a group of *mestizo* men places him at a disadvantage in the male hierarchy. In addition, the rapist's use of the polysemic term "…*y te quitas lo puñal*" ("quit being such a fag", in the English translation) reveals a complex network of meaning where the word "*puñal*" refers to a colloquial variation of the noun *puñetas*, which alludes to the act of male masturbation. It is an offensive slur that is commonly used among men to demean or minimize their sexual prowess. And yet, the variant use of the expression *puñal* contains a double-meaning: it has a larger performative power because of its function as an homophobic insult (the literal meaning is "fag"), while also serving as an archaic term for dagger or short knife. Thus, the utterance of the phrase collapses the discourses of masculinity (already charged with homoerotic and Freudian undertones) over the patriarchal foundations of violence. For these reasons, the whole sequence operates as the centerpiece of *Backyard*. A complex and intricate moment that displays the commitment of the filmmakers to a cohesive and challenging gender discourse.

FILMING THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF FEMINICIDE

Bordertown and *Backyard* exemplify that even with the semiotical possibilities of film, representations of Juárez continue to be coded through the same contradictory dichotomy: abstract discourses of violence (serial killers, *snuff* films industry, postmodern ethos of violence) clashing with concrete and urgent sociopolitical realities (immigration, racism; transglobal and transnational labor, patriarchal hegemony, institutionalized power, censorship). Also, these two films evidence conflicting configurations of feminicide in the context of film genre conventions, in particular, the

fact that narratives of Juárez fixate on the structures and motifs of thrillers and crime fiction stories. Can these limiting discourses be transcended or resolved?

In the case of *Bordertown,* the film offers an effective critique of certain forms of neoliberal constructions of transnationalism, but the story contains debatable representations of Indigeneity. Additionally, the film reproduces the same pitfalls of the Chicana novels analyzed in chapter 2: in the end, the stories of oppressed women in Juárez (be it Indigenous or *mestizo*) serve only as symbolic links for the self-healing of privileged Latina women. And what about *Backyard?* Professional film criticism and Mexican mainstream audiences misunderstood[42] the intent of Carrera's film. That is not to say that some aspects of the film, like Indigenous representation, are exempt of any form of criticism.

At the end of *Backyard*, after Blanca leaves Juárez and flees to the U.S., the last sequence consists of an elaborate and rich collage of the "real" Juárez: shots of the city, the poor *colonias*, gangs waving menacing guns to the camera, footage of the Mexican drug war, images of the international bridge and the border. The landscape fills the screen until we see some text appearing over the footage. The text reads, "Statistics of women murdered in sexual crimes 1996 – 2007" and a numeric counter below shows the total number of victims. The text then changes to an estimated number of disappeared women. And finally, the images of Juárez are juxtaposed with the global statistics of sexual crimes. It starts with Latin American countries and cities (Mexico City, Guatemala, Veracruz, Salvador) and ends with one First World country: the United States. The numbers are staggering. In the end, the theories and speculations are meaningless, as

[42] "The press critiqued the film for its plethora of characters, lack of argument, and false intentionality to represent something other than what it was: fiction. However, it is this hyper-reality and fresh approach to showing Mexico's social problems that seems to be the main reason people recommend the film in Mexican movie theaters'… online commentary threads" (Huerta Moreno, 2012, p. 112).

Blanca explains in her conversation with Peralta. The film states in a bold and direct way the urgent need to stop understanding Juárez as the exception to the rule, as a unique infamy in the history of violence. Instead, Juárez represents an example of a *global phenomenon*. It is this final moment, the sequence confirming Luis Tovar's (2009) labeling of the film as the "most honest" (para. 5) portrayal of feminicide, which provides a possible solution to resolve the contradictory representations of Juárez.

In a scene of the first half of the film, Sara (Carolina Politi), the fictional representation of activist, Ester Chávez Cano, accompanies Blanca on a night shift. While she drives, Blanca explains to Sara that the murdered women are not a priority for the government of Juárez. Then she tells a story she read one time in a magazine. The story is worth quoting in full:

> A town in India holds a ceremony once every full moon until one night, a tiger shows up and eats someone. They flee in terror. A month later they gather again, scared this time. Same history: the tiger jumps out, devours someone, and escapes. The next month, the town gathers again, but this time… they're not scared, because now the tiger is part of the ceremony. He forms part of the ritual. Easy for the world to say, "How can this be?" Just like these murders. A woman dies every month or every week. It's expected and no one cares. It bothered us for a while, but now… we're just waiting for the tiger to come. (Carrera, 2009)

The story's emphasis on the notion of rituals or ceremonies reveals the politico-public registers of fear and violence. Rituals serve specific social functions, but their effectiveness rest on their symbolic attachment with temporal and spatial dimensions. Thus, it is no longer a question of the inherent tragedy that it is fastened to the ritual, but on how systematic violence becomes part of the place and time of the ceremony ("he forms part of the ritual"). Violence as a public act becomes normative because it is exhibited in the community as rule and example. In other words, Blanca's story exhibits how the normative dimensions of misogyny and rape start to form part of our culture as a

system of punishment where, "The perpetual penality that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*" (Foucalt, 1995, p. 183). Indeed, cultural, political and social institutions reproduce a system that not only legitimizes, but also sanctions certain forms of gender violence and (physical and symbolic) punishment that become inseparable from the immediacy of every day life, "thus promoting an ethos of violence, where the status quo is a complete disengagement with the violence" (Huerta Moreno, 2012, p. 130). In this sense, *Backyard*'s political statement represents a provocative turning point in representations of sexual violence because it disregards established narratives of the cases in favor of an elaborate and urgent construction of the cultural foundations and extent of feminicide in human society. We must not forget the question of how film functions at a different level of cultural production. Why did both *Bordertown* and *Backyard* fail at connecting with audiences? This is an important question to ask because the films were designed as genre films for a particular reason: developing the stories as straightforward crime films or thrillers involves an issue of accessibility. And yet, both works lost money in the box office (in both countries) and disappeared quickly from the mainstream. This fact indicates that the use of formulas and tropes of genre films hindered the political impact of these stories. The reason is obvious: film functions on a different level than textual representations. Even a film like *Backyard*, which subverted expectations of crime stories, cannot take advantages of the textual dimension of literature. Written fiction transgresses genre formulas in a more direct, since the semiotic channels can be reconfigured from the perspective of the reader. In film, on the other hand, the visual illusion mandates a sense of global verosimilitude and both films, in one way or another, need to reproduce the particular aesthetics and visual motifs of genre film in order to *comment* on them. In other words, transgression in film

mandates to work, for better or worse, inside an established and enclosed system, that is, within the archetypes and elements that construct genre. By its very nature, genre is enclosed and, in the context of Juárez, prone to simplistic or exploitative representations.

CONCLUSIONS

Why study the representations of Juárez and the feminicides? I began this research project because of the realization that every depiction of Juárez, whether artistic, academic or journalistic, permeated with antithetical discourses. On one hand, the idea that, as scholars, writers, or filmmakers, we are forced to *condemn* and critique Juárez as the urban space and symbolic institution that sanctioned the murders of hundreds of women and girls. On the other hand, the notion that we need to *defend* Juárez as a space of activism where resistance and hope remains. If we take this assessment even further, we just need to remember that, beyond the narratives of violence and horror, Ciudad Juárez exist as a real object, that is, a city of living and breathing people who experience fear and endless violence day after day. Regardless of their political or ideological goals, everyone attempting to discuss Juárez will be forced to engage the blurry limits of these opposing dimensions. Thus, this paradoxical position, at its core, reveals the political limitations of taking Juárez and the feminicides as objects of study or representation. Overall, intellectual and academic interest in Juárez functioned under the, admittedly, naive assumption that a massive influx of artistic and scholarly understandings of the city would yield enough pressure to achieve some kind of political justice.

In a sense, two major achievements resulted from the decade-long strenuous process of increasing awareness of the situation in Juárez: the consolidation of a transnational activist network and the introduction of the term feminicide in Mexico's mainstream political discourse (Aikin Araluce, 2011). It is difficult to assess whether these goals were achieved as a result of the academic work centered on the cases. Since Juárez became an object of study that could be attained, appropriated, and reconfigured by virtually everyone (from Mexican and Chicana feminists to European and Anglo-

Saxon scholars), then it is natural to think that any one of us could claim our work produces concrete or achievable results. Considering the complexity of the Juárez environment, as well as the disheartening sociopolitical environment of contemporary Mexico, it is difficult to measure true political effect. At the same time, we need to remember that fictional and visual representations of Juárez remain, at best, marginal texts. This statement is, perhaps, innacurate in some respects. For example, some of Charles Bowden's works had mainstream impact with the advent of the Mexican drug wars and González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* introduced the cases to a European audience. Nevertheless, these texts are consumed and marketed in very particular ways and they tend to be labeled as parts of very specific genres (like nonfiction). In other words, they do not possess the power or impact to become part of popular culture: one glaring exception is Roberto Bolaño's *2666*.

For many reasons, *2666* has become a ubiquitous part of discussions on Juárez and the feminicides. Because of its impenetrable nature, it stands as a text that can be accessed in multiple ways: a bestseller, as part of Latin American literature; as the product of the legacy of European avant-garde; as an example of transnational fiction; an instance of the unpredictable nature of the literary market, and the list can go on. And yet, of all the texts analyzed thus far, it is the only one that refuses to function as an "accurate" portrayal of Juárez. In this sense, *it is the most unapologetically fictional*. Nevertheless, the novel perfectly exemplifies the paradoxical position I perceive in representations of the murders. Within the space of Bolaño's novel, two versions of Juárez co-exist: a hellish place that evidences universal violence and a very specific geopolitical domain that stands in the intersection of neoliberal capitalism and gender oppression. Moreover, the clashing of these competing discourses extends to the other fictional representations of Juárez. Even when authors (or filmmakers) like Alicia Gaspar

de Alba, Gregory Nava, or Stella Pope Duarte attempt to explain the murders in very concrete terms, and with the consequence of certain sociopolitical conditions, they tend to produce narratives where the feminicides are the result of a violence continuum (phallocentrism, neocolonialism, heteronormative, and so on) that extends beyond the present time and into the larger legacies of Western oppression. How can we resolve these conspicuous contradictions? The possible worlds theory I outlined in the first chapter provides a viable framework to answer this question. In a classic understanding of possible worlds, different fictional versions of Juárez coexist because they are distinct from the real Juárez. Nevertheless, it is important to remember Doležel's assertion that fictional worlds, by their very nature, exist only in "incomplete" forms. We need to transcend the naïve, and dangerous, notion that the limited space constructed by a novel, film, or journalistic account can capture the entire reality of such a complex city as Ciudad Juárez or any other city for that matter. And yet, an incomplete object is still a part of a larger whole. As a consequence, the networks of meaning that these texts provide in unity, rather than in isolation, can serve as access points to illuminate our understanding of the U.S.-Mexico border. That said, we need to critically assess how these pieces fit together and how authors serve as mediators of these possible worlds.

Throughout this thesis, I uncovered the ways that authors rearticulate Juárez in fictional spaces and to what ends. Because of the scope of existing scholarship on the murders, as well as the limitations of space and frameworks, I admit that this research exists, in its current state, as a work in progress. In this sense, any conclusions or patterns I present here should be taken into consideration as unfinished ideas since I am unable to exempt myself from the critique of possible worlds as partial. And despite these restrictions, my analysis of these four books (*Huesos en el desierto*, *2666*, *Desert Blood*, *If I Die in Juárez*) and two films (*Bordertown, Backyard*) reveals two important

considerations: 1) the consequences and symbolic effects of using particular genres to represent the feminicides; and 2) the failures or successes on the fictional articulation of a cogent theoretical and political discourse of feminicide.

IMPLICATIONS OF GENRE FICTION

Of the six texts analyzed, four of them use, to a larger or lesser degree, genre formulas such as detective fiction, crime fiction, and thrillers. The exceptions to this rule are González Rodríguez's and Duarte's books. The former belongs to the nonfiction literary genre, while the latter functions as a coming-of-age story or *Bildungsroman*. In spite of this fact, both texts, at several points shift into more conventional or elaborate discourses of violence present in the other texts. As I mentioned in the early chapters, González Rodríguez's account shifts into narratives of horror and evil, while Duarte cannot avoid instances of torture as a plot point in the last third of *If I Die in Juárez*. Why use genre tropes to formulate these novels? There are practical reasons for this pattern: by creating characters who are investigators and following the structure of crime mystery novels, the authors manage to produce a "map" of the cold facts, key figures, and elements of the real cases that functions as a puzzle, which slowly unravels itself. This allows for readers to have an in-depth understanding of the conditions and developments that occurred in Juárez since the early 1990s. Still, these formalistic decisions also reveal the authors' (as with the case of Bolaño) fixation with providing the readers comprehensive outlines of every possible theory used to explain the murders. This includes abstract discourses (phallocentric violence and heteronormativity) and specific narratives of violence (*snuff* films, *narcosatanism*, serial killers). During this process, authors can choose to simply expose the theories (*2666*, *Huesos en el desierto*,

Backyard), leaving the readers to reach their own conclusions, provide an alternative explanation that resolves the cases (*Desert Blood*); or use one of the existing theories to close the narrative (*If I Die in Juárez, Bordertown).*

Another aspect that differentiates these texts from other fictional accounts is how the authors transgress, re-encode or reproduce the conventions of detective and crime stories. *Desert Blood* attempts to provide a *queer* rereading of detective fiction, while *2666* mimics the structure of crime or thriller fiction, only to destabilize the genre by refusing to provide a sense of closure. The films, on the other hand, reproduce the expected structures, motifs, and visual style of crime films. Even a film like *Backyard*, which subverts the expectations of the audience in its conclusion, is still forced to follow the structure of police procedures because, again, the creators are fixated on representing the different conjectures and theories regarding the murders. Although I could continue analyzing the different approaches that these texts use in regards to the question of genre, one more important question remains: if the texts reveal a clear fictional pattern, then what are the political and symbolic consequences of using the conventions of genre fiction? Three important and problematic ramifications occur due to this lack of narrative diversity:

1) *The use of genre fiction produces a narrative structure that silences or erases the experiences and agency of the women and mothers of Juárez*. Through these texts, readers and audiences reconstruct the circumstances of the crimes alongside the figure of the investigator. But in order for this structure to work, the narrative is forced to center and privilege the experience of the detective. In the cases of *Bordertown* and *Desert Blood*, the main Chicana characters fulfilled the role of an improvised detective, which, in turn, collapses the plot on their identity struggles and familial conflicts. In Bolaño's "The Part of the Crimes" the main narrative

focuses almost exclusively on the perspectives of male investigators: policemen, bodyguards, and journalists. *Backyard* provides a fictional account told from the inside perspective of the Juárez authorities (mainly, the police) and political institutions. Thus, these narratives tend to reinscribe the investigation of the murders as a masculine space or construct individualistic narratives centered on the investigators, rather than represent the particular struggles of activists and the mothers of the victims. They are stripped of their agency and rarely speak for themselves.

2) *The victims' experiences and agency are reduced to the violence inflicted in their bodies or their status as evidence*. Within the fictional worlds of detective and hardboiled fiction, the narrative gaze encodes violence in its bare form. The plot and the mystery unravel the conditions of violence. However, violence exists in these fictional spaces only as a physical aftermath: bodies, forensic reports, autopsies, the modus operandi of the killers, and so on. Victims are objects that the investigator uses to reconstruct an incomplete story. This structure permeates the representations of Juárez although in different ways. In the films, the camera moves in the scene and only stops to focus at the bodies in the desert. In the case of Bolaño, there is a clear obsession to catalogue and describe in detail the body, while also refusing to show or narrate how this violence was enacted on the victims. This contrasts with Gaspar de Alba's (and the last third of *If I Die in Juárez*) detailed description of the process of torture and rape experienced by the women. In more simple terms, the experiences of the women of Juárez are reduced to objects that exemplify the effects of violence. They do not exist as subjects, but as objects, evidence, and data of a larger sociopolitical phenomenon.

3) *The legacy of hardboiled and crime fiction reproduces neocolonialist discourses of border violence*. As I explained in my analysis of *Desert Blood*, the genealogy of hardboiled fiction (and by extension, detective and crime fiction) exhibits clear connections with colonialist fiction. This criticism can be extended to the rest of the texts. The particular structures of these stories otherize the spatial environments where the crimes occur. Urban spaces in these fictional worlds are filled with violence and lawlessness. Thus, Juárez exists as a periphery between the Third and First World with a long history of exotic objectification and as a main example of stereotypical border representations as sites of promiscuity, disease, and illegal activities.

Although Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez* remains an interesting exception to these patterns, the novel also exemplifies how literary and visual representations of Juárez lack narrative diversity. Even if Duarte fails at representing complex Indigenous experiences and the narrative devolves into superficial representations of sexual violence and savagery, the novel provides an urgent divergence from other stories set in Juárez. The fact that she chose to tell the story of three Mexican girls indicates how authors can transcend the usual tropes of detectives, forensic investigations, and speculative theories of violence. On a similar note, *If I Die in Juárez* shares with both *Backyard* and *Bordertown* the presence of Indigenous characters, which reveals how some artists decided to problematize the homogenous depictions of the victims' identities ("brown women from the South working in the *maquilas*") through the construction of a diverse panoply of racial experiences in Juárez. Nevertheless, the notion that all of these texts, to a larger or lesser degree, used motifs and structures of crime and hardboiled fiction indicates that much of the cultural impact of the feminicides was reduced to disseminating the theories

of specific culprits (serial killers, the drug cartels, and so forth), rather than constructing the murders of women as a complex set of political, racial, cultural, and economic conditions. In this sense, let us move to the second conclusion of my research: the relative success or failure of these texts in producing a coherent and cogent discourse of misogynistic violence.

TOWARDS A DISCOURSE OF FEMINICIDE

One important gap in the analysis of fictional representations of Juárez involves the underlying fact that these texts are required to negotiate two competing ideological stances. On one hand, they describe and encode through fiction the elaborate criminal investigations and events that transpired in the city in the late 1990s. These include, but are not limited to the ineffective response of Juárez authorities, censorship of media; the available theories and main suspects of the murders, and so on. In other words, these novels and films are forced to construct Juárez as one singular case or phenomenon of violence. On the other hand, the complexity of the phenomenon of feminicide demands an ideological stance about the questions of gender and contemporary violence. That is not to say that the cases of Juárez and the discourse of feminicide exist as independent problems. After all, they are deeply interconnected. Rather, I want to point out how the process of representing Juárez requires recognizing the clear *ideological* position of the authors. Are the writers and artists interested in the city and the murders as a localized case of violence or as an isolated example of a much larger phenomenon? Are the authors and the texts constructing a discourse on feminicide? Or just retelling and speculating about possible suspects? Are they reproducing violence for the sake of violence?

Like my previous conclusions in regards to genre, this question cannot be reduced to a single pattern since each texts negotiates these clashing Juárez's discourses in different ways. Gaspar de Alba and Nava clearly wanted to emphasize the role of the United States and NAFTA in the production of the conditions that enabled the murders. For Duarte, the matter of sexual violence relates to the Mexican historical legacy of colonialism, racial conquest, and patriarchy. For González Rodríguez, the feminicides are a consequence of both neoliberal capitalism and the fractures of the Mexican Nation-State. In contrast, Bolaño's case is less obvious. If we consider "The Part of the Crimes," Bolaño constructs a very cohesive and effective discourse about the effects of gendered violence, whether enacted on male or female bodies. In the larger context of *2666*, "Crimes" places the feminicides in a larger continuum of Western historical violence, while simultaneously rearticulating *Huesos en el desierto* as a way to avoid an essentialized narrative of violence. Through this elaborate process, *2666* maintains a political and ideological connection to a nonfictional world. This implies an *ethical impasse* where the structure of the novel allows for the coexistence of both readings or worlds: *2666* as political and apolitical, fictional and nonfictional; universal and localized.

Overall, analyzing the texts side by side makes clear that *Backyard* remains the only attempt at introducing and resolving this complex debate. Carrera and Berman decided to negate the overlapping theories of the murders and opted, instead, for denunciation of feminicide as a larger phenomenon. At the same time, the film exemplifies the difficult and problematic line that anyone transverses when representing Juárez. The statistics shown at the end of the film, as well as how the use of genre is resolved in the narrative, reveal how Berman's script and Carrera's visual prowess strived to privileged the construction of feminicide in political terms as a global

phenomenon. In one way or another, all texts, to some degree, erase the possibilities of concrete justice. After all, when *Backyard/El Traspatio* states, in literal terms, that there can be no resolution to the murders, by extension it implies that the pain of the mothers and families of the victims will continue. Indeed, there are a number of important moral and ethical ramifications of this political stance, since it entails the notion that this form of violence transcends the political and economical resources of the Mexican Nation-State. How can they resolve issues that are not unique to contemporary Mexico? Why is Juárez used as a cultural producer of misogynistic violence when every developed country has similar instances of patriarchal oppression? Before some final remarks to close this thesis, I will briefly move to the present context of Mexico and how the current drug war halted the political discourse of feminicide.

FROM FEMINICIDE TO THE DRUG WARS: CURRENT ISSUES AND DEBATES

On September 5, 2006, Felipe Calderon Hinojosa was declared the 56th President of Mexico amidst controversies of electoral fraud. Calderon's first decision upon taking office was to declare open warfare against the many drug cartels operating in Mexico by deploying 4,000 soldiers to his homestate of Michoacán ("Mexico troops sent to fight drugs," 2006). Although drug-related violence was not a new phenomenon in contemporary Mexico, violence began to escalate since the presidency of Vicente Fox Quesada in the early 2000s. The downfall of the Colombian cartels, the decline of power of the PRI party (believed to have a tacit agreement with the cartels since the 1980s), and the reorganization or formation of new cartels in different cities and states located along the U.S.-Mexico border (Cd. Juárez, Tijuana, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, etc.) and ports of entry (Acapulco, Veracruz), created the conditions for an unprecedented conflict that,

according to some statistics, has caused more than 100,000 casualties, including children and women (Zuckerman, 2013). Inevitably, this ongoing conflict affected how academic, journalistic, and cultural work developed about Ciudad Juárez and the feminicides. If we look at the chronological framework of the events anyone would conclude that the impact of the drug war was significant, complicating an already impenetrable issue.

The impact of the war can be assessed in more concrete terms in the overlapping of the political responses to assess the phenomenon of feminicides and the intensification of the violence. In 2003, the Chamber of Deputies (mainly led by the leftist party, PRD) agreed to the formation of a special commission to monitor and research the extents of gendered violence in Mexico (*Comisión Especial para Conocer y Dar Seguimiento a las Investigaciones Relacionadas con los Feminicidios en la República Mexicana y la Procuraduría de Justicia Vinculada*). The findings of the Comission (feminicide as a national issue) led to the development of a General Law of Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence, which signaled an historical attempt to type feminicide as a crime against humanity (Lagarde, 2010). The ultimate goal of this long and complicated process was to amend the Federal Code of Criminal Procedures, establishing feminicide as a new politico-criminal category. However, the Senate rejected the proposal in 2007, just one year after the beginning of the drug wars. Thus, a bleak narrative emerges: any political momentum in handling the Juárez' murders and the question of feminicide gained in the previous decade was lost. In a few years, the violence would become so overwhelming that the women of Juárez became invisible in mainstream media. It was not so much a question of political value, but rather a question of sheer *scale*: tens of thousands of victims, most of them male, against hundreds of death women.

Despite the deep interconnection of these two moments of violence, is it possible to provide evidence that, in fact, this discursive shift took place in the last six years?

González Rodríguez (2012) asserts, "spokespeople for the Juárez oligarchy persist in denying that the murders of women constitute a problem… They allege that many men are murdered in the city as well–failing to recognize, or underestimating misogynist aggression… The denial of extermination is part of the extermination" (p. 84). Thus, the authorities and institutions of Juárez blamed scholars, activists, feminists, and artists for unjustly demonizing the city, as well as turning the murders into a "myth" and a "black legend." Again, whether we take sides in the debate or not, the clash of discourses over Juárez continues.

After one year of reading academic and fictional representations of Juárez, I came to the realization that, in the last twenty years, Ciudad Juárez became an insurmountable object caught in a never-ending web of discourses that clash and reorder at every turn. As the academic and artistic material increased, so did the network of competing perspectives. In its current state, the mere idea of providing an overview of the available scholarship would require several books and dissertations. For better or worse, Juárez has slowly morphed into a symbolic open structure where every reading, metaphor or construction can be imposed without restriction. Discerning what theory or perspective is correct or incorrect has become a meaningless endeavor simply because, at one point, during the endless quest for justice, Juárez became a discourse in itself. An object that can be deployed to express or construct specific discourses on many issues: gender, power, race, violence, globalization, amongst many others. Thus, fictional representations of Juárez represent an important avenue of research because these texts exhibit the contradictory negotiation of contrasting discourses and a clear lack a critical self-awareness of our own positionality and intellectual privilege. Everyone who has visited or experienced life in Juárez could attest to the deeply complex and paradoxical reality that engulfs the city. A reality that cannot be fully represented in any textual space or

fictional world. Few scholars and writers would dare to mention the morbid dimensions of representing Juárez, but even fewer people have attempted to research the conditions of production and reception of these works. The fact that the murders reached global infamy exhibits, in the most painful and direct way, how the line that divides political indignation and morbid fascination is very thin. Still, the debate must continue: straddling those dangerous limits, understanding the points where perspectives overlaps, exploring how fiction gives us access to matters of ideology and representation epitomize the need for questioning our role in the axis of power and symbolic violence.

Appendix A

CATALOGUE OF HYPOTHESIS ON THE FEMINICIDES

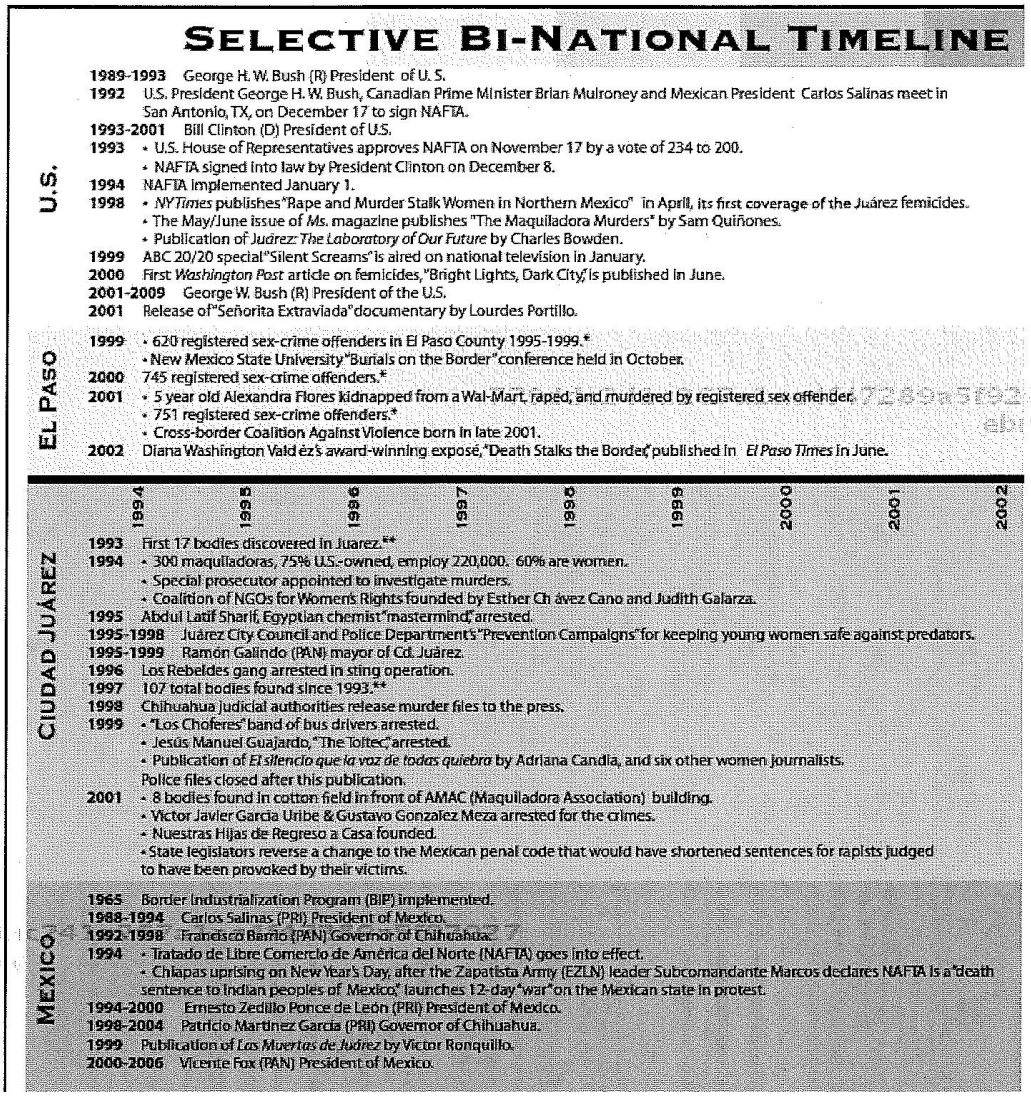
Appendix	
Hypothesis on the authorship of the murders	*Source or spokesperson of the hypothesis*
Organized Crime	
1.Illegal organ trafficking	Authorities/journalists/testimonies of citizens
2.*Snuff* pornography	Journalists/academic and intellectual community/testimonies of citizens
3.Messages of drug traffickers to the authorities	Community leaders/academic and intellectual community
4.Executions related to drug cartels	Journalists/academic and intellectual community
5.Gang retaliation	Journalists/academic and intellectual community/testimonies of citizens/Catholic Church
6.Complicity of police	Journalists/testimonies of citizens/Catholic Church (some sectors)/intelligence agencies
7.Selection of victims through catalog photography of *maquila* workers	Filmmakers/families of victims
8.Climate of insecurity as a result of a culture of terror	Journalists/academic and intellectual community/international organizations
9.To benefit oligarchic families of the area	Journalists/international organizations/testimonies of citizens
Psychological and Social Pathologies	
10.Kidnapings organized by the *juniors* of Juárez in order to secure private orgies	Filmmakers/playwrights/testimonies of citizens/families of victims
11.Sacrifice of women in satanic rituals	Evangelical Church/journalists/academic and intellectual community/government officials
12.”Copycat” crimes	Intelligence agencies/government officials/police
13.Inherent nature of men	Testimonies of citizens/community leaders
14.Private orgies of businessmen	Intelligence agencies/testimonies of citizens/Evangelical Church
15.Crimes of passion	Government officials/police
16.Family revenge	Intelligence agencies/police
17.Serial killers from the United States	Intelligence agencies/testimonies of citizens
18.Fetichism	Police/journalists
Sociological and Gender Hypothesis	
19.Male resentment due to labor competition	Academic community/ intellectuals/ journalists/testimonies of citizens
20.Increase of the public presence of women	Academic community
21.Patriarchal retaliation as a result of the	Academic community and intellectuals

threat of an increasing female influence	
22.Misogyny	Journalists/academic community and intellectuals/international organizations/political parties
23.Racism	Academic community/international organizations/testimonies of citizens
24.Project to reduce Southern migration	Academic community/Catholic Church/community leaders
State Crimes	
25.Ineficient infrastructure and poverty	Community leaders/political parties/academic community/government officials/international organizations
26.Climate of impunity	Businessmen/academic community/journalists
27.Lack of planning and prevention	Community leaders/academic community
Moral and Christian Perspectives	
28.Lack of moral values	Catholic Church/ Evangelical Church
29. Female fashion	Testimonies of citizens/government officials/public schools/Churches
30.Use of spaces not appropriate for women	Businessmen/police/government officials/Churches/political parties
31.Female promiscuity	Churches/political parties/testimonies of citizens
32.Family disintegration	Churches/journalists/political parties

Source: Ruvalcaba, H. D., & Blancas, P. R. (2003). La batalla de las cruces: Los crímenes contra mujeres en la frontera y sus intérpretes [The Battle of the Crosses: Crimes Against Women in the Border and their Interpreters]. *Desacatos*, *13*, 122–133 (Translation mine).

Appendix B

BI-NATIONAL TIMELINE OF THE CASES



SELECTIVE BI-NATIONAL TIMELINE

U.S.

1989-1993 George H. W. Bush (R) President of U. S.
1992 U.S. President George H. W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Mexican President Carlos Salinas meet in San Antonio, TX, on December 17 to sign NAFTA.
1993-2001 Bill Clinton (D) President of U.S.
1993 • U.S. House of Representatives approves NAFTA on November 17 by a vote of 234 to 200.
• NAFTA signed into law by President Clinton on December 8.
1994 NAFTA implemented January 1.
1998 • *NYTimes* publishes "Rape and Murder Stalk Women in Northern Mexico" in April, its first coverage of the Juárez femicides.
• The May/June issue of *Ms.* magazine publishes "The Maquiladora Murders" by Sam Quiñones.
• Publication of *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* by Charles Bowden.
1999 ABC 20/20 special "Silent Screams" is aired on national television in January.
2000 First *Washington Post* article on femicides, "Bright Lights, Dark City," is published in June.
2001-2009 George W. Bush (R) President of the U.S.
2001 Release of "Señorita Extraviada" documentary by Lourdes Portillo.

EL PASO

1999 • 620 registered sex-crime offenders in El Paso County 1995-1999.*
• New Mexico State University "Burials on the Border" conference held in October.
2000 745 registered sex-crime offenders.*
2001 • 5 year old Alexandra Flores kidnapped from a Wal-Mart, raped, and murdered by registered sex offender.
• 751 registered sex-crime offenders.*
• Cross-border Coalition Against Violence born in late 2001.
2002 Diana Washington Valdéz's award-winning exposé, "Death Stalks the Border," published in *El Paso Times* in June.

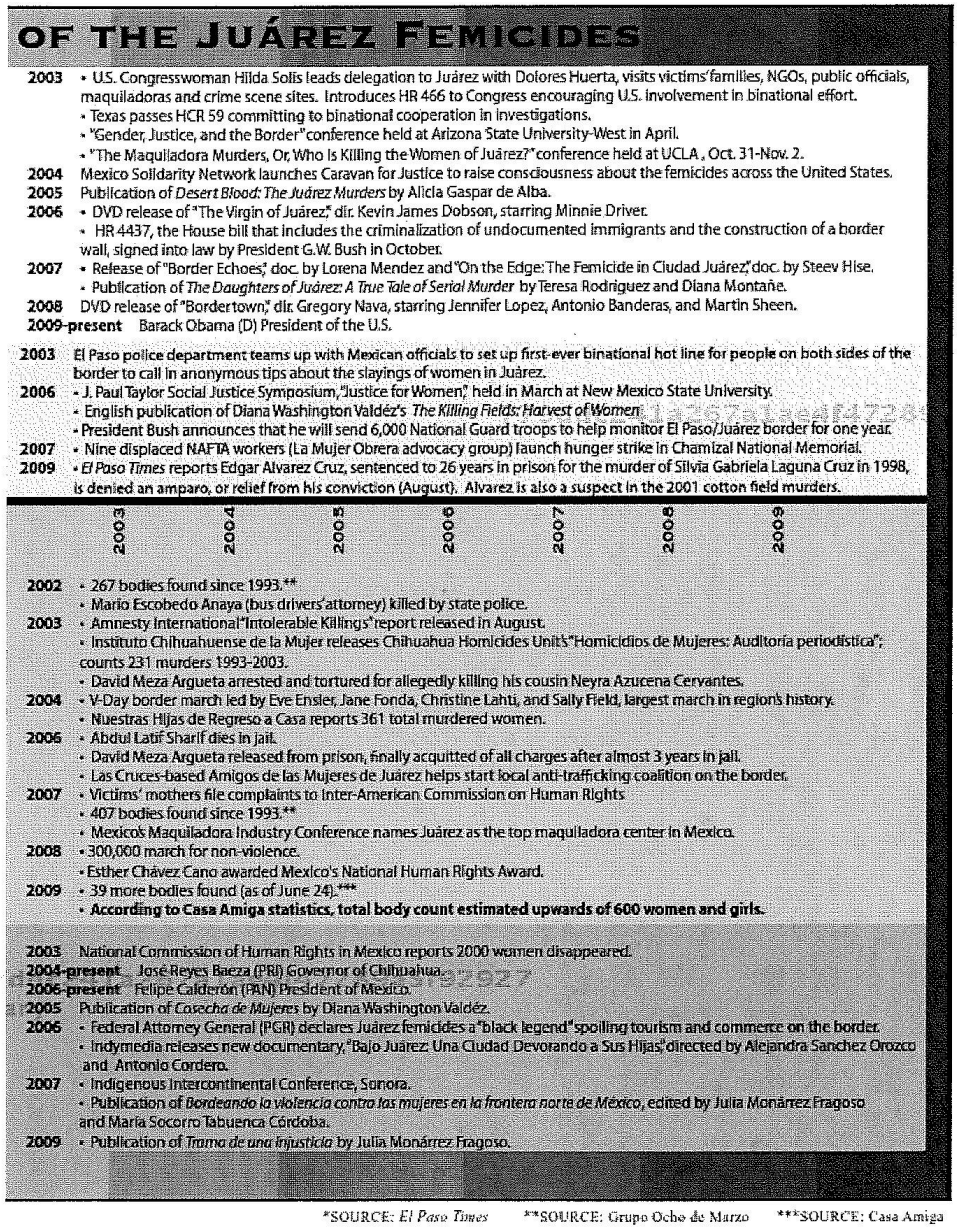
1994 1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002

CIUDAD JUÁREZ

1993 First 17 bodies discovered in Juarez.**
1994 • 300 maquiladoras, 75% U.S.-owned, employ 220,000. 60% are women.
• Special prosecutor appointed to investigate murders.
• Coalition of NGOs for Women's Rights founded by Esther Chávez Cano and Judith Galarza.
1995 Abdul Latif Sharif, Egyptian chemist "mastermind," arrested.
1995-1998 Juárez City Council and Police Department's "Prevention Campaigns" for keeping young women safe against predators.
1995-1999 Ramón Galindo (PAN) mayor of Cd. Juárez.
1996 Los Rebeldes gang arrested in sting operation.
1997 107 total bodies found since 1993.**
1998 Chihuahua judicial authorities release murder files to the press.
1999 • "Los Choferes" band of bus drivers arrested.
• Jesús Manuel Guajardo, "The Toltec," arrested.
• Publication of *El silencio que la voz de todas quiebra* by Adriana Candia, and six other women journalists. Police files closed after this publication.
2001 • 8 bodies found in cotton field in front of AMAC (Maquiladora Association) building.
• Victor Javier García Uribe & Gustavo González Meza arrested for the crimes.
• Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa founded.
• State legislators reverse a change to the Mexican penal code that would have shortened sentences for rapists judged to have been provoked by their victims.

MEXICO

1965 Border Industrialization Program (BIP) implemented.
1988-1994 Carlos Salinas (PRI) President of Mexico.
1992-1998 Francisco Barrio (PAN) Governor of Chihuahua.
1994 • Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (NAFTA) goes into effect.
• Chiapas uprising on New Year's Day, after the Zapatista Army (EZLN) leader Subcomandante Marcos declares NAFTA is a "death sentence to Indian peoples of Mexico," launches 12-day "war" on the Mexican state in protest.
1994-2000 Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (PRI) President of Mexico.
1998-2004 Patricio Martínez García (PRI) Governor of Chihuahua.
1999 Publication of *Los Muertas de Juárez* by Victor Ronquillo.
2000-2006 Vicente Fox (PAN) President of Mexico.



OF THE JUÁREZ FEMICIDES

2003 • U.S. Congresswoman Hilda Solis leads delegation to Juárez with Dolores Huerta, visits victims' families, NGOs, public officials, maquiladoras and crime scene sites. Introduces HR 466 to Congress encouraging U.S. involvement in binational effort.
• Texas passes HCR 59 committing to binational cooperation in investigations.
• "Gender, Justice, and the Border" conference held at Arizona State University-West in April.
• "The Maquiladora Murders, Or, Who Is Killing the Women of Juárez?" conference held at UCLA, Oct. 31-Nov. 2.
2004 Mexico Solidarity Network launches Caravan for Justice to raise consciousness about the femicides across the United States.
2005 Publication of *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* by Alicia Gaspar de Alba.
2006 • DVD release of "The Virgin of Juárez," dir. Kevin James Dobson, starring Minnie Driver.
• HR 4437, the House bill that includes the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and the construction of a border wall, signed into law by President G.W. Bush in October.
2007 • Release of "Border Echoes," doc. by Lorena Mendez and "On the Edge: The Femicide in Ciudad Juárez," doc. by Steev Hise.
• Publication of *The Daughters of Juárez: A True Tale of Serial Murder* by Teresa Rodriguez and Diana Montañe.
2008 DVD release of "Bordertown," dir. Gregory Nava, starring Jennifer Lopez, Antonio Banderas, and Martin Sheen.
2009-present Barack Obama (D) President of the U.S.

2003 El Paso police department teams up with Mexican officials to set up first-ever binational hot line for people on both sides of the border to call in anonymous tips about the slayings of women in Juárez.
2006 • J. Paul Taylor Social Justice Symposium, "Justice for Women," held in March at New Mexico State University.
• English publication of Diana Washington Valdéz's *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women*.
• President Bush announces that he will send 6,000 National Guard troops to help monitor El Paso/Juárez border for one year.
2007 • Nine displaced NAFTA workers (La Mujer Obrera advocacy group) launch hunger strike in Chamizal National Memorial.
2009 • *El Paso Times* reports Edgar Alvarez Cruz, sentenced to 26 years in prison for the murder of Silvia Gabriela Laguna Cruz in 1998, is denied an amparo, or relief from his conviction (August). Alvarez is also a suspect in the 2001 cotton field murders.

2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009

2002 • 267 bodies found since 1993.**
• Mario Escobedo Anaya (bus drivers' attorney) killed by state police.
2003 • Amnesty International "Intolerable Killings" report released in August.
• Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer releases Chihuahua Homicides Unit's "Homicidios de Mujeres: Auditoría periodística"; counts 231 murders 1993-2003.
• David Meza Argueta arrested and tortured for allegedly killing his cousin Neyra Azucena Cervantes.
2004 • V-Day border march led by Eve Ensler, Jane Fonda, Christine Lahti, and Sally Field, largest march in region's history.
• Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa reports 361 total murdered women.
2006 • Abdul Latif Sharif dies in jail.
• David Meza Argueta released from prison, finally acquitted of all charges after almost 3 years in jail.
• Las Cruces-based Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez helps start local anti-trafficking coalition on the border.
2007 • Victims' mothers file complaints to Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
• 407 bodies found since 1993.**
• Mexico's Maquiladora Industry Conference names Juárez as the top maquiladora center in Mexico.
2008 • 300,000 march for non-violence.
• Esther Chávez Cano awarded Mexico's National Human Rights Award.
2009 • 39 more bodies found (as of June 24).***
• **According to Casa Amiga statistics, total body count estimated upwards of 600 women and girls.**

2003 National Commission of Human Rights in Mexico reports 2000 women disappeared.
2004-present José Reyes Baeza (PRI) Governor of Chihuahua.
2006-present Felipe Calderón (PAN) President of Mexico.
2005 Publication of *Cosecha de Mujeres* by Diana Washington Valdéz.
2006 • Federal Attorney General (PGR) declares Juárez femicides a "black legend" spoiling tourism and commerce on the border.
• Indymedia releases new documentary, "Bajo Juárez: Una Ciudad Devorando a Sus Hijas," directed by Alejandra Sanchez Orozco and Antonio Cordero.
2007 • Indigenous Intercontinental Conference, Sonora.
• Publication of *Bordeando la violencia contra las mujeres en la frontera norte de México*, edited by Julia Monárrez Fragoso and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba.
2009 • Publication of *Trama de una injusticia* by Julia Monárrez Fragoso.

*SOURCE: *El Paso Times* **SOURCE: Grupo Ocho de Marzo ***SOURCE: Casa Amiga

Thanks to Allison Wyper & Tom Ryan.

Source: Alba, A. G. de, & Guzmán, G. (Eds.). (2010). *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. University of Texas Press, p. 309. Retrieved from http://site.ebrary.com/id/10428837?ppg=309

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