On Border and On Murder

The Juárez Femi(ni)cides

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Using the critical methods of postcolonial studies and various feminist theories, this study investigates the Juárez femi(ni)cides and argues that they are not only heinous crimes but the result of a socio-economic system of structural inequalities around cultural and social constructions of class, race, gender and citizenship in the US-Mexico border. The Juárez events are an example of large-scale, brutal violence against women; at the same time, they point to the globalising processes that amplify the androcentric instrumentalisation of women's bodies under capitalism and (post)colonialism. My analysis of these intersecting categories is framed by Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualisation of the US-Mexico border.

Keywords: US-Mexico border, femicides/feminicides, gender,androcentrism, maquiladoras, Ciudad Juárez

Introduction: Approaching the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands

As many cultural critics have shown, American identity relies heavily on the idea of an expanding Western frontier which marks the progress of American society and its civilising mission, a view that corresponds with Western notions of colonialism and capitalism.[1] American national myths such as the one of Western expansion, as (re)interpreted in both Frederick Turner's Turner Thesis and the 'regeneration through violence' construed by Richard Slotkin, show that American thought and identity historically rely on the concept of the border.[2] Thus, the U.S.-Mexico border is understood as a margin that geographically and symbolically outlines the United States. At the same time, this border has long posed a security issue for the U.S. government since it is 'both

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barrier and bridge to many transnational flows, including trade, migrants, and narcotics.'[3] According to Corona and Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, there is a correlation between economic transformation or crisis in the borderland region and the increased incidence of recorded violent acts.[4] U.S.-Mexico borderland violence, then, is linked to forces such as swelling cross-border migration and measures that target undocumented workers including extensive militarisation and wall-building as well as the booming *maquiladora* factory system that is managed by multinational corporations using cheap Mexican and migrant labour. Moreover, the current radicalisation of drug cartels and organised crime also contributes to an image of the border, widely circulating in the media, as a violent and dangerous place and its function as a topographic metaphor for various kinds of illegality, lawlessness and impunity.[5]

Anzaldúa's La Frontera

In her now canonical yet paradigm-subverting masterpiece, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa, a leading figure in Chicana literature and feminist activism describes the U.S.-Mexico border as a '1,950 mile long open wound,' a 'thin edge of barbed wire' and even more figuratively as *'una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.'[6] A native of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in south Texas, Anzaldúa reconceptualises the border beyond the role attributed to the dividing line in traditional geographical and geopolitical assumptions.[7] Instead, the border, she claims, is an agent that informs the re/deconstruction of one's self and has to do with the historical and cultural legacies of colonialism and various types of oppression based on class membership, racial background, gender identity and other ascribed social categorisations. Thus, the border in Anzaldúan thought operates as a metaphor for a process of differentiation which is inherent to Western thought and typified by hierarchical binary oppositions that may – as feminist and postcolonial inquiries have successfully demonstrated – provide grounds for oppressive and discriminatory practices.

The frequent citation of the quotes from Anzaldúa listed above – along with increasingly common references to her work in disciplines such as political science, migration studies, political geography, sociol-

ogy, psychology and criminology, which lie outside its original scope[8] – testify to the enduring challenge that the U.S.-Mexico border poses to both American and Mexican societies and cultures and the countries' interrelations. Anzaldúa's contribution does not consist solely, however, of her literary portrayal of the hybrid identities that are negotiated along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo border[9]; it can also be found in the oppositional terminology and methodology she developed in *Borderlands/La Frontera,* a work which has proven instrumental for intersectional research into the complexities and ambivalences of the U.S.-Mexico border region.

In the Western conception, the border serves as an instrument for controlling geographical or spatial territories at a material level. At the same time, it informs epistemic categories at a social and/or ideological level.[10] The concept, thus, embodies the Western desire for constancy, fixed boundaries (of, for example, states or empires and the established social order) and uncontaminated categories (of personal identity) while also pointing to the symbolic violence that permeates such fixity and stability.[11] In contrast, Anzaldúa offers a radical deconstruction of these rigid views of the border, remaking it as a concept which is used not to divide but to create. As much as the border is believed to manage the inside and the volume or contents of the entity it should maintain, it simultaneously suggests its own productive potential; it creates that entity's Other, and thus, shows us that the idea that control is exerted over – or by – a boundary is essentially a myth. Therefore, the border region is, according to Anzaldúa, 'in a constant state of transition' and 'a vague and undetermined place' inhabited by borderland subjects who defy the desired neat and clear-cut confines of the normal.[12] Further, borders, whose productive qualities result in heterogeneity, hybridity, fluidity and ambiguity, are heavily laden with the emotional investments made by these subjects. Such borders are never a natural occurrence but a construct that is permanently under negotiation and often violently disputed.

Anzaldúa's references to physical pain and bleeding wounds can be read as a literary rendering of the mourning performed by the *mestiza*, i.e. the woman of multiracial identity and bicultural background who now straddles Mexican and American cultures and reflects on the arbitrarily drawn interstate borderline. Such a woman is a symbol of Mexico's ceding of its northern territories and their then inhabitants to the United States following the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848. In the Chicanos/as, the offspring of these annexed Mexicans, these experi-

ences trigger a sense of uprootedness and a lost home and the onset of cultural, racial and linguistic discrimination.[13] Anzaldúa's view of the U.S.-Mexico border as a source of the injurious Othering practices faced by Chicanos/as also powerfully subverts one of the cultural fundaments of American national identity, namely the myth of the shifting Western frontier as the limit of the country's successful settlement of the continent.[14] In other words, unlike the dominant and privileged white American society that may subscribe to a national narrative of expansion as a completed civilising mission, indigenous and mestizo/a communities resist and problematise similar discourses as not only traumatising and dehumanising but most critically Western and/or Eurocentric.[15] Furthermore, as I have suggested, since borders not only define the self but mark that self's Other, the shift in the U.S.-Mexico border in 1848 can be seen as presenting a challenge to the 19th-century notion of American-ness since Mexico had long served as America's opposite. Now, paradoxically, part of Mexico was integrated within the United States. These examples of subversive reinterpretations of the U.S.-Mexico border attest to the complex, multifaceted and distinctively heterogeneous character of the region.

Annihilation in Juárez

While the previous sections have dealt with the analysis of metaphorical wounds and their representation in an exemplary Chicana narrative, in what follows I wish to turn to the raw reality of the contemporary U.S.-Mexico border and particularly the femi(ni)cidal violence faced by mestizas employed in *maquiladoras*, i.e. the large assembly facilities in the export-processing industries in the Ciudad Juárez area.[16] As a matter of fact, Anzaldúa's imagery also speaks to the gross disparity in the economic and social conditions along the dividing line, a reality that triggers violence based on gender, class and race as well as migrant background or non-citizenship and contributes hugely to the physical and economic exploitation of Mexican and Latina women within the context of androcentric and postcolonial societies. Anzaldúa's figurative language demonstrates the author's awareness of the fact that on the south side of the U.S.-Mexico border, there is – literally – human blood being spilled.[17]

Towards the end of the millennium, Ciudad Juárez – the Mexican twin to the U.S. border city of El Paso, Texas – became infamous as the site of the 'longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history.'[18]

It is estimated that between 1993 and mid-2010, hundreds of women were brutally murdered in the area. The body count varies vastly depending on the source, however it is guessed that somewhere between 300 and as many as 800 women were found dead in Ciudad Juárez or the vicinity.[19] Besides the enormous number of women slain, what made the murders unprecedented were the abhorrent ways in which the killings were carried out and the places where the victims' corpses were later discovered. No less significant is the context in which these femicides have continued to take place. Dynamic factors such as mass industrialisation, globalisation, the gendered stratification of the labour market, precarious work, lack of infrastructure, enormous inequalities between the areas to the north and south of the U.S.-Mexico border, an androcentric social system dictating strict gender roles and Mexican states' failure to promote safety on the streets and in production facilities contribute to neoliberal ideas about the worth of a human being.[20] Put more explicitly, the idea that female bodies are disposable under capitalism and androcentrism in Mexico sets women on what Wright calls 'the road to waste.'[21] The U.S.-Mexico border can, thus, be seen as 'the space where the fluctuating booms and downturns of the global, regional, formal, and underground economies and markets have a direct impact on such fundamental issues as the preservation and reproduction of human life.'[22]

The Question of (Un)Representability

Before I proceed further with the discussion of the Juárez murders, as these women's deaths came to be known, I wish to digress for a moment, or rather, to pause. This pause is meant to draw attention to the issue of the (un)representability of the deaths of the femicidal victims and of the horrors they endured. The danger of discussing violent deaths, elevated in the case of gruesome deaths by murder, lies in the potential for reproducing pain and anguish. The unspeakable violence directed at the dead Juárez women prior to their decease resists representation; this unspeakability relates to both the form and content of the violence and the failure of language to treat the women's agony fairly. In this regard, death is unrepresentable for, as Kenneth Burke observes, no one 'can write of death from an immediate experience of it, the imaging of death necessarily involves images not directly belonging to it…[It lies] beyond the realm of such images as

the living body knows.'[23] In other words, every representation of death is always a misrepresentation.[24] And yet, the single item that actually *does represent* the murdered women is their demise. Paradoxically, as Gaspar de Alba notes, 'the main signifier of [the dead women's] lives is a corpse half-buried in a sand dune.'[25] Or, as Agosín puts it in a poem: 'All we know about them / is their death.'[26] Thus, death in the case of the Juárez femicides is represented and simultaneously escapes representation. It poses a challenge to our systems of meaning-making, order, governance, culture and civilisation.[27] Goodwin and Bronfen eloquently explain the dilemma around death's representation:

> Representation presupposes an original presence, and in the case of death that is clearly paradoxical. In any representation of death, it is strikingly an absence that is at stake, so that the presentation is itself at a remove from what is figured. This is not just to claim that any representation of death in fact targets something else – the terms in which it chooses to make itself known – though no doubt some would argue just that. Any representational discourse implies the muteness, absence, nonbeing – in short, the death – of the object it seeks to designate. Death, as the real process of division, can perhaps best be expressed through figures of liminality, figures that expressly signify allegorically and thus speak the nonsignifiable 'Other" through negation or displacement. As Jacques Derrida argues, 'All graphemes are of a testamentary essence. And the original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or the referent.' The text is substituted for the body, the material object of its reference: 'The letter killeth.'[28]

Attempts to represent someone's death are inevitably linked to ethics. Since one cannot represent one's own death, the task is always left to others and points at the very limit of (mis)representation. How does one duly and adequately represent a person's death without replicating the violence symbolically? How does one avoid the pitfalls of misrepresentation when misrepresentation, as Goodwin and Bronfen argue, is the only option? Also, whose interests are being served through such an act of mis/representation? Should the unspeakability of Juárez murder victims' torment prevent us from speaking?

Acceding to feminist epistemologies and methodologies that promote a self-reflexive research approach based on the critical assessment of one's epistemic position and tacit assumptions, or what is re-

ferred to as the politics of location,[29] I understand that my work here may be deemed problematic in several respects. For one thing, I may face an attack similar to the one leveled at activists from both Mexico and the United States who are pressing for a thorough investigation of this crime wave: this is the potential accusation that I am making (part of) my (academic) career "off dead women's bodies." In fact, this is a risk run by all the authors on whose work I base this study although none of them reflects openly on this ethical ambiguity. I also note the specificity of my position in terms of racial, linguistic, cultural and topographical background and the fact that it does not match the backgrounds of either the U.S-Mexico borderlands-based academics/activists researching the Juárez murders or the women killed.

Subscribing to Spivak's critique of an epistemic determinism and essentialism which frequently hinder a person's ability to speak and represent, I have made all attempts to complete what this postcolonial, Indian-born thinker calls 'homework,'[30] i.e. I have read and researched widely on the U.S. borderlands over the past decade, travelled repeatedly to the region, and finally, consulted all resources on the Juárez killings available to me. In other words, I believe, I have earned 'the right to speak'[31] since silence generated by the fear of unintentional misrepresentation not only censors one's thoughts, but most importantly, avoids and erases histories of oppression that must be re-membered and preserved as a critical forewarning of humanity's failures.[32] Thus, the current study authored by a European scholar functions to raise awareness of the Juárez murders beyond the "domestic" region of the United States, Mexico and Central America since there exist very few articles on the topic written by European academics.[33]

Femi(ni)cides and the Borderlands

The poststructuralist approach teaches us that language produces reality and does not just reflect it. Yet, as I have already suggested, language also fails to represent liminal events such as violence, terror and death in their complexity and scope. In such cases, language misrepresents. And so does silence. The heinous crimes in Juárez most often target poor, dark-skinned and petite female workers, many of whom are migrants from southern Mexican states or other Central American countries.[34] The appearance of their bodies after death is rarely conveyed in explicit language in academic research. This may be for reli-

gious reasons or due to the fact that a sketchy portrayal may provoke even more horror than a detailed rendering. These considerations are not, however, discussed in the resources.

Notwithstanding the problems of mis/representing and reproducing violence, Rosa Linda Fregoso breaks the ice and proceeds to illustrate the unparalleled savagery of the femicides. The victims, she writes, were 'tortured and sexually violated: raped, strangled or gagged, mutilated, with nipples and breasts cut off, buttocks lacerated like cattle, or penetrated with objects. Some bodies are beyond recognition, so disfigured and decomposed, no one can identify them nor claim them.'[35] Their defaced bodies were dumped in landfills or deserted lots around Ciudad Juárez; others were abandoned in cars, tanks of acid or trash dumpsters, left at major traffic intersections or dragged under shrubs and thistles in the desert.[36] Such explicit images may prompt conflicting reactions ranging from "Where has respect for the deceased women and their families gone?' to 'This clearly shows the killings are more than just murders.'

Indeed, to this second point, I would add that these are examples of 'gender extermination,'[37] a phenomenon that may seem random and accidental, but in reality is woven into a web of systematic and systemic patterns of abuse of and violence targeting women. The Juárez murders are an extreme example of the devaluation of femininity in a globalised capitalist society built on androcentric values and patriarchal institutions that normalise and perpetuate gender-based violence. The proximity of the U.S-Mexico border functions in this regard as a key (f)actor in the Juárez femicides; the border constitutes a 'denationalized'[38] space that is meant to facilitate the integration of, and cooperation between, the Mexican and U.S. economies. With its vague rules and dwindling laws of conduct, the region is characterised by a unique combination of cross-border activities not found elsewhere: illicit trade, contraband smuggling, human trafficking, drug cartel operations, sex tourism; this is, in general, the clandestine economy that is engendered by the U.S. police and military presence.[39] As Chew Sánchez argues, the Mexican side of the border has been turned into an almost lawless zone in order to promote the smooth operation of the maquiladora industry; as such, it has produced a situation of 'illegal and legal interdependence that has limited the Mexican state's capacity to guarantee the rights of its citizens.'[40] The same can be said for the rights of non-nationals, migrants and – especially –women.

Conditions of impunity and illegality at the U.S.-Mexico border, thus, create an environment in which poor, young, racialised women, many of whom are migrants stripped of family support and rights, can be disposed of easily.

The severity of the torture preceding death in the Juárez femicides defies the idea that they were simply personal attacks. Rather, it points to misogyny and the dehumanisation of women on a symbolic level and the state's failure to warrant their safety on a practical level. In Monárrez Fragoso's words, femicide is deeply rooted in an androcentrism that 'predisposes, to a greater or lesser degree, that women be murdered. Be it for the simple act of being women, or for not being one "adequately."'[41] According to Diana Russell, who helped establish "femicide" as an analytic category back in the 1970s, these are 'murder[s] of women and girls *because* they are female.'[42] Traditional and persistent terms like "manslaughter," "homicide" and "murder" obscure the power structures within a society that shapes and constructs women's vulnerability to a kind of violence which is specifically based on their gender identity. The specificity does not lie in the violence as such – violence is common in crimes against both men and women - but rather in the fact that in an assault, women, unlike men, experience a *submission* to masculine violence. Fregoso and Bejarano elaborate on the intricacies here:

> [U]nlike most cases of women's murders, men are not killed because they are men or as a result of their vulnerability as members of a subordinate gender; nor are men subjected to gender-specific forms of degradation and violation, such as rape, sexual torture, prior to their murder. Such gender differences in the experience of violence suggest the need for an alternative analytic concept, such as feminicide, for mapping the hierarchies embedded in gender-based violence.[43]

These authors, thus, expand the form and content of "femicide" and introduce another term, "feminicide," which discursively reflects the Spanish-speaking milieu and is therefore more broadly applicable to local circumstances.[44] Feminicide, then, comes to signify a murder of women and girls based on a gendered power structure as well as an act of gender-based violence that is both 'public and private, implicating both the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or state actors); it thus encompasses systematic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal violence.'[45] Ultimately, feminicide is also

viewed as a 'crime against humanity.'[46] Fregoso and Bejarano, thus, basically perceive feminicide as a phenomenon with cultural roots which is at least partially institutionalised.

Unlike Monárrez Fragoso or Russell, who situate femicide mainly within the strictures of the patriarchy, Fregoso and Bejarano agree on a broader notion of feminicide which allows for comprehensive assessment of the contextual factors that contribute to the incidence of women's killings while remaining cognizant of gendered power relations. In a similar spirit, Schmidt Camacho and Arriola warn against a simplistic perception of the Juárez feminicides as acts of regressive masculine aggression. Rather, they call for an examination of the connection between gender-motivated violence and changes in the social cohesion of Juárez due to heavy and rapid industrialisation, as well as for an analysis of the contradictions arising from codes of neoliberal governance and development, which also have a gendered dimension.[47] Globalisation contributes to the destabilising of nation states in general,[48] and in concrete terms, it has prompted the Mexican government to adopt neoliberal measures regarding the maquiladora boom. As I explain below, marginalised Mexican and migrant women have consequently become a massive class of disenfranchised non-citizens whose bodies are constantly under social as well as corporate control as they are commodified and literally consumed by the maquiladora assembly line.

On Border and On Murder

The Assembly Lines Disassembling Ciudad Juárez

Various forms of gendered violence are intrinsic to wars as well as to nation formation, social transformation, economic transition and capitalist development.[49] As many authors have contended, the effects of the 1993 ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) gradually turned Ciudad Juárez into a major hub for transnational trade and a centre for U.S.-owned corporations.[50] These companies built maquiladoras, which eventually employed thousands of young women from poor and working class backgrounds. Currently, there are between 2,200 and 3,107 maquiladoras throughout Mexico, and they employ at least 550,000 and perhaps as many as 1.3 million workers. It is estimated that between 275 and 400 (and possibly even 500) of these assembly facilities are located in Juárez, giving jobs to between 173,000 and 250,000 workers.[51] According to Wright, the ratio

of men and women currently employed by the maquiladoras is about 50:50. Nevertheless, women perform more than 70% of the low-wage, labour-intensive operations on assembly lines while men occupy salaried supervisory, managerial and technical positions.[52]

The concurrence of NAFTA's ratification and the discovery of the first murdered women suggests a link between the murders and an increase in women's vulnerability owing to the restructuring of the labour market and the state's lack of control over – or 'fatal indifference' to – transnational corporations' treatment of the labour force.[53]As Fregoso and Bejarano point out, between 1985 and 1992, 37 women were killed violently in Ciudad Juárez, while in the subsequent seven years between 1993 and 2001, local women's rights groups recorded a 700% increase in feminicides, i.e. as many as 269 of these killings.[54]

NAFTA was not, however, the first significant business- and industrialisation-oriented development to vastly transform the economic and social landscape of the borderlands and simultaneously incite shifts in established gender norms. The year 1964 saw the end of the Bracero Program, which since the early 1940s had provided jobs to Mexican nationals – predominantly men – in the U.S. agricultural sector, thus safeguarding cheap labour for American farmers. The termination of the programme caused high unemployment and subsequent social problems along the border. Moreover, the United States tightened its immigration policies. The situation became particularly acute in Ciudad Juárez to which many now jobless Mexican workers migrated or returned. The problem also underscored a historical disregard for – and marginalisation of – the borderland region and *fronterizo* culture within the Mexican nation. Perceived as being too removed from the centre and normative Mexican traditions yet too close to the economic hegemony of the U.S. (despite being part of Mexican territory before 1848),[55] Juárez still finds itself in this uncomfortable liminal space: it is located on the border between two nations and simultaneously at the margins.

The solution to massive unemployment was thought to lie in the development-centred Border Industrialisation Programme which the Mexican government introduced in 1965 leading to the mushrooming of maquiladoras across the northern border region. As a result, the north of the country was soon looked to as a model of modernisation to be spread throughout Mexico. Ironically, however, unemployment rates did not lower significantly because the Program attracted not just ex-Bracero workers but also people from inland Mexico; the region's

population, thus, grew rapidly. Volk and Schlotterbeck note that the number of jobs in Juárez's assembly plants rose from 3,175 in 1970 to 249,509 in 2000 while the population of the city increased threefold to 1.2 million.[56] In addition, the employment strategies of the maquiladoras' foreign managers defied the tacit assumption of the Border Industrialisation Programme that men should be the newly employed labour force. Instead, the factories hired women en masse since they were seen as ideal workers for the assembly lines: besides being substantially cheaper than men, they were said to be docile, easily controlled, undemanding, nimble-fingered, lacking in union experience and disposable when production cuts became necessary since their primary role was that of a homemaker, wife and mother and not career-maker.[57]

As men were left jobless and their primary patriarchal role of breadwinner was usurped through the gendered transformation of the labour market, women – though continuing to work "second shifts" at home to attend to their families – experienced their first moments of at least partial financial independence. At the same time, "women's labour on the global assembly line" became a standard phrase in a nationalist rhetoric that charged them with responsibility for ushering Mexico into modernity. By 1982, the year of the Mexican debt crisis, women made up 80% of all maquiladora employees and the city, according to the president of Asociación de Maquiladoras de Ciudad Juaréz, 'had become a matriarchy.'[58] The situation, of course, critically challenged existing androcentric structures and generated resentment and anger in men, which conversely made women more vulnerable members of the socially and economically strained Juárez community. Put differently, as Volk and Schlotterbeck tell it, 'maquiladora industrialization ultimately created a gendered and racialised political economy and shaped the city's geography in ways that facilitated, absorbed, and, perhaps, promoted femicide.'[59] Radical economic changes after NAFTA, thus, picked up the threads of the industrialisation and modernisation processes that had long torn at Juárez's social fabric; their results included gender, class and racial inequalities as well as growing economic disparities caused by the Mexican government's inadequate regulation of tariffs on maquiladoras and the corporations' failure to implement work safety measures and other regulations against labour rights violations.

If the maquiladoras' employment of women in place of men strongly shook the pillars of patriarchal norms – and it must be repeated that women's employment peaked in the early 1980s, as implied above, and

not subsequent to NAFTA – then these maquiladora had a similarly profound impact on the urban layout. The extensive growth of assembly plants produced socially excluded areas, or shanty towns, where poor maquiladora employees continue to live with little basic infrastructure such as running water, electricity, health care, schools and available public transport.[60] Lengthy early- and late-hour bus commutes make these female workers especially vulnerable to attacks. The public sphere in the marginalised Juárez *colonías* is, thus, dangerous for women. And this is also true of the maquiladoras. Even putting aside the fact that some of the contracted drivers of maquila-provided commuter buses have previously been charged with sexual assaults and/or rape (and thus, are thought to be possible perpetrators of the Juárez femicides), in workplaces with limited safety precautions, women are regularly subjected to urine tests to screen out pregnant workers.[61] Furthermore, within the labour hierarchy, women are, as I have suggested, relegated to inferior positions to male workers in terms of decision-making and management, and this enables widespread sexual harassment. Since female employees are well aware of their replaceability, their need for a job prevents them from protesting these advances or reporting this behaviour.[62] In effect, women's working bodies and their functions are constantly threatened, monitored and observed and, thus, reduced symbolically to sexual(ised) objects. The most extreme case of this – outside of pregnancy checks – is seen in regular employer-sponsored beauty pageants. The industry perpetuates stereotypical versions of femininity and is responsible for the sexualisation of factory life, which inevitably has bearing on the sexualisation of life beyond the maquiladora walls and fences.[63]

Discourses of Blame and Victimisation

These actions that sexualise and fetishise women's bodies need to be seen within the context of Juárez's historical notoriety as a city where inexpensive sex, drugs and leisure were easily available to U.S. soldiers, international tourists and working-class migrants.[64] Working and wage-earning women who have become vital consumers of the city's entertainment and nightlife and who socialise outside their homes while spending their own money subvert yet another patriarchal notion – that of a domesticated femininity which has no place in the public sphere. The streets, restaurants, bars, discos and cafés are seen

as off-limits to virtuous Mexican women since these spaces are associated with frivolity, promiscuity and risk. Nor, however, is the home is a safe space for women because, as Fregoso notes, traditional cultural values support the idea of 'masculine authority and ownership' over the lives of women and therefore domestic violence may function as 'a mechanism of punishment or control.'[65] Still, the limits of this control must be negotiated once women secure their own financial income (no matter how low) and they venture into the public domain.

Against this backdrop, the initial androcentric backlash in Juárez established a unique image of female factory workers: their sexuality and maquiladora labour were merged together and used to explain (or worse, to justify) the femicides. This discourse noted the pre-NAFTA maquiladora developments' failure to alleviate men's unemployment and promote Mexico's modernisation, which had been contested by the 1982 debt crisis; it also cited the non-fulfilment of the post-NAFTA promise of economic prosperity for which the female labourers were blamed. The result was that women began to be seen as the cause of Juárez's problems rather than another exploited group under booming capitalism. Because of women, it was said, men were absent from the maquilas; because of them, the social and gender fabric had changed; and because of them, Mexico was struggling with its development projects.[66] The discourse of women-blaming was in place and gaining increasing momentum.

As both Fregoso and Wright observe, the Mexican government and Juárez's official representatives failed dismally to respond to the brutal femicides.[67] To explain this neglect and failure, the authorities employed a twofold rhetorical strategy: first, they denied the systematic nature of the murders. And then, when more and more mutilated corpses were uncovered and this approach had become untenable, they resorted to the discourse of *la doble vida* (the double life) drawn from an androcentric fusing of women's sexuality and their maquiladora labour as breaches of established gender norms. In other words, the state blamed the femicidal victims for 'manufacturing their own deaths'[68] by accusing them of having lived non-normative lives, transgressed gender norms and/or had double lives, i.e. having engaged in maquila work by day and sex work by night (as though these would ever be reasons justifying someone's murder).

This secondary victimisation clearly drew on a symbolic level on the cultural construct of the women dutifully wedded to her home and

family and not to the public domain, even for job reasons. By extension, it also blamed women who had entered the workforce for the disintegration of the Mexican family and the weakening of male authority. As Fregoso emphasises, the subject created through *la doble vida* discourse was an immoral one and the state's preoccupation with women's morality was actually a 'form of institutionalized violence, that makes women responsible for the violence directed against them. [...] What's more, shifting the blame toward the victims' moral character in effect naturalizes violence against women.'[69]

The second rhetorical strategy followed the appalling discovery of the bodies of eight women in a lot adjacent to the Maquiladora Association's headquarters in 2001. Before this event, police and state investigations of femicide had come under question from numerous NGOs as well as the public[70] since only a handful of the putative perpetrators had been arrested and only one, the Egyptian chemist Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif, had been jailed.[71] The new discourse of disaggregation, as Fregoso has called it, reformulated the femicides as discrete, unrelated cases and employed statistics and other scientific means to gain authority and divert attention away from the impunity. This strategy at once divorced the feminicides from the broader context of the city's social and economic issues and isolated them from the systemic phenomenon of violence against women based on unexamined local complexities. In effect, it emphasised the 'universal aspects of the crimes as a "common" occurrence in any major city,'[72] and so insisted on the normality of the Juárez killings. Thus, the *la doble vida* and the disaggregation discourses not only naturalised and normalised violence against women, but reinforced the impunity and other factors that reproduce it. At the same time, they absolved state institutions of any responsibility.

Conclusion: Violence as a Norm and Female Worthlessness – the Juárez Holocaust

The systematic neglect, devaluation, sexualisation, objectification and dehumanisation of female workers within a patriarchal society and inside capitalist corporations go hand in hand with systemic resistance to addressing economic exploitation, safety breaches and all forms of inequality and discrimination. In Juárez, the consequence has been the fragmentation of a community and the destabilising of a society in the borderland region. Faced as we are with institutions which through

their (in)actions are *de facto* institutionalising and authorising certain forms of violence as the norm and so underlining the worthlessness of a social group which is *already* coded by a feature of its identity (e.g. disposability on the labour market, race or gender), we cannot help harkening back – and here let me make a bold comparison – to the mechanisms that have enabled human holocausts.

Bauman makes the apt point that dehumanisation in its crudest form is now associated with photographs of concentration camp inmates whose very existence is reduced to the most basic level of survival; they have been denied all the symbols of human dignity and especially an identifiable human likeness. Further, he shows how the bureaucratic transformation of humans into objects or sets of quantitative measures deprives people of their distinctiveness and subjectivity.[73]

The defacement of the femicidal victims' bodies has, as we have seen, a hellish or otherworldly quality and demonstrates that before their deaths, the assaulted women were deprived of dignity and disposed of like things, or as Wright puts it astutely, like waste.[74] Outside of their "killability," they were worthless just as previously – because of their replaceability – they had been disposable on the capitalist assembly line. This worthlessness is not radically different from the worthlessness ascribed to extermination camp prisoners. The androcentric Othering of women, especially of racialised women, and the victim-blaming discourses that normalise such violence have, as Wright again shows, the same myth-like quality:

> [D]iscourses that have been commonly told by political and business elites in Ciudad Juárez to minimize the significance of [the] crime wave [...] repeat a story of how third world women are propelled by cultural and sexual forces toward a condition of waste. Therefore, when women workers are determined to be worthless or when women's corpses are dumped like trash in the desert, these discourses explain how, given these women's 'intrinsic worthlessness,' such events are both natural and unavoidable. [T]hese discourses work into each other to create a powerful mythic figure of a wasting third world woman whose essential properties are said to be found within real women who work in global factories and who experience all sorts of violence, for which they are held accountable.[75]

It, thus, seems that the deaths of the Juárez femicide victims are not worth grieving – to draw a parallel with Judith Butler's argument in *Frames of War*[76] – and they merely serve as instruments of a social

control that is generated by fear. Their dehumanisation is, as I have highlighted, the result of multiple effects of androcentrism, globalisation and state failure. The Juárez murders are not just ghastly crimes on a massive scale. They are a result of a socio-economic system of structural inequalities related to cultural and social background, class, race, gender and citizenship which are all significantly affected by globalising processes and the androcentric – or misogynist – organisation of both American and Mexican societies. Due to the institutionalised character of gendered violence in Juárez, I view the femicides as a micro-level holocaust. As such, the femicides and their discursive and cultural framings should not only be perceived as threats to social cohesion on the U.S.-Mexico border, but as major threats to all of humanity.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Frederick Turner [1893] (1921), *The Frontier in American History*, New York: Henry Holt; Richard Slotkin [1973] (2000), *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860,* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Deborah Madsen (2010),'The West and Manifest Destiny,' in John Carlos Rowe, (ed.) (2010), *A Concise Companion to American Studies,* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, pp.369-386; Elizabeth Furniss (1998),'Pioneers, Progress and the Myth of the Frontier: The Landscape of Public History in Rural British Columbia,' *BC Studies* 115-116, pp.7-44; Andrea Tinnemeyer (1999),'Why Border Matters to American Studies,'*American Quarterly* 51 (2), pp.472-478.

2 Turner [1893] (1921); Slotkin [1973] (2000).

3 Jason Ackleson (2005),'Constructing Security on the U.S.-Mexico Border,' *Political Geography* 24, p.166.

4 Hector Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona (eds.)(2011), *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representations and Public Response*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, p.2.

5 Ibid, p.3.

6 Gloria Anzaldúa [1987] (1999), *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, pp.25-26.

7 Ackleson (2005), p.169.

8 Anzaldúa's work has its roots in American/Mexican/Chicana literature and

women's studies. For examples of its application by scholars across other disciplines, see, for example, Melissa Wright (2006), *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, New York, London: Routledge; Gloria González-López (2005), *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán (eds.) (2010), *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, Austin: University of Texas Press; Aida Hurtado (2003),*Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity*, New York: New York University Press.

9 Homi Bhabha (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, pp.112-115.

10 Martin Procházka and Aleida Assman (2003),'Introduction: Boundaries and Contact Zones,' *Litteraria Pragensia* 13(26), p. 5.

11 P. Bourdieu (2001), *Masculine Domination,* Cambridge: Polity, pp.41-42.

12 Anzaldúa [1987] (1999), p.25.

13 John R. Chávez, (1984), *The Lost Land: The Chicano Images of the Southwest*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

14 Frederick Turner [1893] (1921). I have dealt elsewhere with the topic of Western expansion as a founding myth of American national identity and its reappraisal from both postcolonial and gender-sensitive perspectives. In that work, I situate Turner's Thesis against Chicano/a counter-discursive strategies that seek to expand the understanding of the border as a major concept shaping Chicano/a identity and borderland subjectivity. I also elaborate on Anzaldúa's portrayal of mestizo/a existence and the (gendered) violence connected with American expansionism. See Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová (2014), 'Elastic, Yet Unyielding: The U.S.-Mexico Border and Anzaldúa's Oppositional Rearticulations of the Frontier,' *European Journal of American Studies* 9(3).

15 Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, New York: Zed Books.

16 Wright (2006), p.7.

17 It is important to emphasise that when Anzaldúa wrote *Borderlands/La Frontera* in the mid-1980s, she could not have been referring to the type of violence that now permeates this border zone, i.e. the murders of women in Juárez and drug cartel conflicts. It is true that the values of societies based on androcentrism, capitalist exchange, colonialism, racist and homophobic prejudice and other modes of discrimination incite various forms of violence and oppression no matter what borders they share; nevertheless, this study puts the disparities between the United States and Mexico under scrutiny. I am also convinced that Anzaldúa's optics could – with a context-sensitive and epistemologically reflexively positioned approach – be applied to other parts of the world where cultures border on one another since she illuminates the workings of power based on arbitrary categorisations. The lived experience of the U.S.-Mexico border conveyed in her work testifies to the fact that various forms of violence are commonly experienced by almost all members of the Chicano/a community in the United States.

18 Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), p.1.

19 Irene Mata (2010),'Writing on the Walls: Deciphering Violence and Institutionalization in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*,' MELUS 35(3), pp. 15, 35-36. For example, the essays in the *Making a Killing* anthology give different estimates of the number of women murdered. As the editors put it: 'There has been no systematic accounting of the victims or accountability by the authorities, which results in only more confusion, more impunity for [the] perpetrators, and less chance of resolution,' Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), p.10. Even so, there is general agreement that the official count is far lower than the actual numbers of women killed. The essays in the volume suggest a range of 300 to 600 victims.

20 Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2010),'Poor Brown Female: The Miller's Compensation for "Free" Trade,' in Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), p.65. Elvia Arriola (2010),'Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras: Linking Corporate Indifference to Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border,' in Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), pp.25-61; Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003), *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities in the Borderlands*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, pp.17-20; Martha Idalia Chew Sánchez (2014),'Feminicide: Theorizing Border Violence,' *Latin American Research Review* 49(3), p.267.

21 Wright (2006), pp.3-19,71-89; Melissa W. Wright (2001),'A Manifesto against Femicide,' *Antipode*, 33(3), pp.562-563.

22 Ibid, p.2.

23 Kenneth Burke quoted in Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elizabeth Bronfen (eds.) (1993), *Death and Representation,* Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, p.4.

24 Goodwin and Bronfen (1993), p.20.

25 Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), p.4.

26 Marjorie Agosín (2006), *Secrets in the Sand: The Young Women of Juárez*, Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, p.27.

27 Goodwin and Bronfen (1993), p.4.

28 Ibid, pp.7-8. The quote from Jacques Derrida appears in *Of Grammatology* (1974), Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 69. The line 'The letter killeth' is taken from 2 Cor. 3:6.

29 See Adrienne Rich (2003),'Notes Towards Politics of Location,' in Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (eds.) (2003), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, New York, London: Routledge, pp.29-42.

30 Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1986),'Questions Of Multi-Culturalism,' *Hecate*, 12 (1-2), pp.136-142.

31 Ibid.

32 Cf. Ania Loomba (2005), *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London, New York: Routledge; Zygmunt Bauman, (1989), *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

33 See, for example, Marietta Messmer (2012), 'Transfrontera Crimes: Representations of the Juárez Femicides in Recent Fictional and Non-Fictional Accounts,'*American Studies Journal* 57.

34 Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), pp. 3-5.

35 Rosa Linda Fregoso (2000),'Voices Without Echo: The Global Gendered

Apartheid,'*Emergences* 10(1), p. 137.

36 Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), p. 3.

37 Fregoso (2003), p.1.

38 Alicia Schmidt Camacho (2005), 'Ciudana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women's Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico,' *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5(1), p. 255.

39 Ibid, p. 276.

40 Chew Sánchez (2014), p. 269.

41 Julia Monárrez Fragoso (2002),'Serial Sexual Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: 1993-2001,'*Debate Femenista*, 25 (13), n. p.

42 Diana Russell and Roberta Harmes (eds), *Femicide in Global Perspective*, New York: Teachers College Press, p.15. For a detailed overview of the development of the definition of femicide, see Diana Russell (2009), 'Femicide: Politicizing the Killing of Females,' paper presented at the conference 'Strengthening the Understanding of Femicide: Using Research to Galvanize Action and Accountability,' PATH, InterCambios, MRC, WHO: Washington DC, accessible at: < www.igwg.org/igwg_media/femicide/russell.doc>.

43 Fregoso and Bejarano (2010), p. 7.

44 Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, (eds.), (2010), *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, pp. 4-6. Although I use "femicide" and "feminicide" interchangeably, the majority of sources employ the English term "femicide."

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, p. 5.

47 Arriola (2010), p. 27; Camacho (2005), p. 278.

48 Yasemin Nuhoólu Soysal (1994), *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

49 Camacho (2005), p.271; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba Corona (2011), p.4; Loomba (2005); Sylvanna Falcón (2001), 'Rape as a Weapon of War: Advancing Human Rights for Women at the U.S.-Mexico Border,' *Social Justice 28(2); Nira Yuval-Davis (1997), Gender and Nation*, London: Sage Publications.

50 See, e.g., June Nash (2005),'Women in Between: Globalization and the New Enlightenment,' *Signs* 31(1), pp. 149, 153-156; Katherine Pantaleo (2010),'Gendered Violence: An Analysis of the Maquiladora Murders,' *International Criminal Justice Review* 20(4), pp.350-351; Ronald L. Mize (2008),'Interrogating Race, Class, Gender and Capitalism Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Neoliberal Nativism and Maquila Modes of Production,' *Race, Gender & Class* 15(1-2), pp. 135, 143-149; Jessica Livingston (2004),'Murder in Juárez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line,' *Frontiers* 25(1), pp.67-70; Steven S. Volk and Marian E. Schlotterbeck (2010),'Gender, Order, and Femicide: Reading the Popular Culture of Murder Ciudad Juárez,' in Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), pp.126-131; María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba (2010),'Ghost Dance in Ciudad Juárez at the End/Beginning of the Millennium,' in Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), pp.96-99; Melissa Wright (2011),'Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border,' *Signs* 36(3), pp.720-722; Melinda Haley (2010),'The Industrial Machine and the Exploitation of Women: The Case

of Ciudad Juárez,' *Forum of Public Policy* 5, pp.4-14.

51 Haley (2010), p.4; Wright (2001), p.364.
52 Ibid.
53 Arriola (2010), p.33.
54 Fregoso and Bejarano (2010), p.36.
55 Astrid Haas and María Herrera-Sobek (2012), 'Transfrontera. Transnational Perspectives on the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Introduction,' *American Studies Journal* 57.
56 Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010), pp.126-127.
57 Haley (2010), p.7.
58 Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010), p.129.
59 Ibid, p.127.
60 Michelle Téllez (2008),'Community of Struggle: Gender, Violence, and Resistance on the U.S./Mexico Border,' *Gender & Society* 22(5), p.545.
61 Gaspar de Alba, (2010), pp.64-65.
62 Mata (2010), pp.20-21.
63 Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010), p.127; Fregoso (2000), p.141.
64 Camacho (2005), p.265. See also Melissa Wright (2004),'From Protests to Politics: Sex Work, Women's Worth, and Ciudad Juárez Modernity,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94(2).
65 Fregoso (2003), p.17.
66 Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010), pp.127,130.
67 Fregoso (2000), pp.138-147; Fregoso (2003), pp.3-20; Wright (2011), pp.711-719. See also Melissa Wright, (2011),'National Security versus Public Safety: Femicide, Drug Wars, and the Mexican State,' in Shelley Feldman, Charles Geisler and Gayatri Menon (eds.), *Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation: Accumulating Insecurity: Violence and Dispossession in the Making of Everyday Life,* Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, pp.285-297.
68 Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), p. 10.
69 Fregoso (2003), pp. 5-6.
70 For details of the activities of women's rights initiatives and local and international NGOs responding to the Juárez femicides, see Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010) (parts 2 and 3) and Wright (2011).
71 Gaspar de Alba (2010), pp. 66-70.
72 Fregoso (2003), p. 6.
73 Bauman (1989), pp. 102-103.
74 Wright (2006), p.18.
75 Ibid.
76 Judith Butler (2009), *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*? New York: Verso.