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Murdered Women on the Border:
Gender, Territory and Power in Ciudad Juárez


by

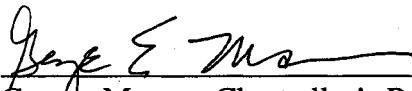
Cecilia Ballí

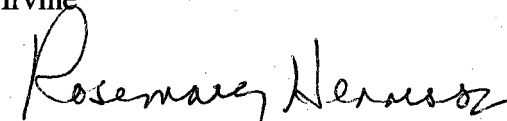
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Abstract

Murdered Women on the Border: Gender, Territory and Power in Ciudad Juárez

by

Cecilia Ballí

This dissertation examines the sexual killing of women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, at the turn of the 21st century. Focusing on the abduction and murder of a 15-year-old young woman named Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, whose body was recovered in 2001 in a mass grave that included seven other female victims, it questions how the social categories of gender, space and power shape both everyday violence and the murder of women in a highly industrialized yet structurally underdeveloped city. The dissertation examines varying notions of womanhood in Esmeralda's family in the context of domestic violence, migration from urban to rural contexts, and the experience of sexual murder. It also argues that gendered violence is the product of an emergent form of hypermasculinity in U.S.-Mexico border zones, informed by the history, style and logics of militarization and organized crime. The dissertation then explores the spatial geography of violence in Juárez, and how the victimization of both men and women is shaped by the constant struggle between social groups for sovereignty.

and control of territory. Finally, it traces the development of a new configuration of power in border zones that is produced between the interstices of the State, the secondary State of organized crime, and of capital, a form of power that relies on the continued production of violence and terror for its reproduction and maintenance. Throughout the dissertation, narrative and ethnography are employed strategically in order to help make sense of an episode of social crime that superficially appears to defy meaning.

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Introduction:

Murder on the Border

There are stories that do not end happily. In fact, there are stories that don't end at all. One cool November morning, a bricklayer ambles across a small cotton field on a busy intersection of Ciudad Juárez and detects a foul smell that leads him to a body. And that is how the lives of Irma Monreal and her daughter Esmeralda become part of the substance of one of the most disturbing and circulated news stories in recent memory, referred to singularly as "The Women of Juárez." Who are these women? According to popular story, they are poor teenage girls who are kidnapped on their way to or from work, raped, tortured, strangled to death, mutilated, and thrown in the desert like garbage. They are slender and pretty. They have long hair, dark skin, and personal ambitions generally unexpected for Mexican women of their class. They come from small, peaceful, innocent towns in the countryside to this bustling, dangerous metropolis on the Mexican-American frontier, where they have no family or community. Being as unsophisticated as they are, they don't know how to protect themselves from the many groups of preying men who surround them: the street gangs, lusty bus drivers, drug traffickers, policemen who protect drug traffickers, rich daddy's boys, Satanic worshippers, organ traffickers, pornography filmmakers, sexual predators from other countries, and remorseless serial killers who roam the streets of Ciudad Juárez in search of fresh, young skin. Those are the theories, anyway – the simultaneously horrifying and seductive plot that underlies this now famously heart-wrenching story.

In writing a dissertation about Esmeralda's murder and about a series of female assassinations that arguably make up the darkest and most shameful crime episode in Mexican history I was forced to engage with a hyper-narrated subject. "The Juárez women's murders," as they are most often labeled collectively – or the "Juárez femicides," as feminists and other activists call them – have inspired news reports, talk shows, books, films, songs, poems, plays, art installations, even postcards. They have been detailed and documented and denounced in NGO reports, government studies, scholarly articles, Congressional resolutions. They've provided a theme for forums, conferences, teach-ins, marches, protest rallies, prayers and vigils worldwide. Somewhere in the middle of this messy web of representation is where Irma Monreal exists, and where she has tried and continues to try making sense of the seemingly senseless killing of 15-year-old Esmeralda, a high school student who disappeared on a weekday morning while she was on her way to work as a housekeeper, a temporary job she'd taken on to help pay for her *quinceañera*. Esmeralda was the fourth of Irma's seven children and the first of the eight bodies recovered in one city lot in the span of two days in November 2001. It's within that same web that I have struggled to get to know the Herrera Monreal family despite, if impossibly outside of, that discourse.

I first met Irma – a domestic worker turned factory hand turned small business owner turned back to domestic worker – on a bitter-cold afternoon in January of 2003. Except for a brief nighttime foray into the city during a California-bound road trip in 1995, this was my first visit to Juárez, which is right

across the international line from El Paso, Texas. This time I was on assignment for Texas Monthly magazine, and an El Paso newspaper reporter had offered to let me follow her and a Los Angeles film crew to Irma's small home on a hilly, unpaved neighborhood known as Los Aztecas. Irma hailed from the state of Zacatecas but had moved to the border to flee domestic violence and to find a job that might pay her enough to raise a pack of children without a husband. She was only 42 years old at the time but her face, the color of tanned leather, was lined with the wounds of grief. Esmeralda had been murdered a little more than a year before our visit. To Irma, though, it felt like yesterday. The lively television reporter who was with us and who had gotten to know Irma on a previous visit asked if she would repeat the story of Esmeralda's disappearance and death, this time for the camera. This was not new for Irma – the mothers of the Juárez murder victims are constantly asked to recount their cases for reporters, activists, and government people. She took a chair in the bedroom where Esmeralda had once slept. But once the camera started to roll and she began to narrate, Irma was barely able to put her reflections into words. If she had greeted us warmly, now an unfathomable gulf opened up between us and we stared at each other helplessly. "It's something you'll never understand," she told us between sobs. Standing off in a corner wrapped in my winter coat because the house was so cold, I sensed that she was right.

I returned to Juárez exactly a year later, this time for a solid year of fieldwork. Sitting before a brown stucco apartment complex in El Paso inside a

Jeep Liberty that was crammed with every personal belonging I'd been able to fit (the high vehicle was for roaming the desert outskirts and rocky roads of Juárez), I felt the weight of the task in my stomach for the first time. I remember how it took every ounce of willpower I could muster to get off the car. During my first nine months there, I crossed the Bridge of the Americas to Juárez almost daily and wandered around the city without too much focus, scratching at the subject here and there, interviewing this or that person, reading newspapers, visiting bars, attending funerals, sitting in conferences. I wanted to use narrative in my writing, but I'd yet to come across a storyline that I felt would do justice to the subject and could present the murdered women and their mothers in a deeper dimension. I began to ask myself if I had chosen a subject that could not be narrated, that was unsuitable for storytelling. I had not returned to Irma's house because I remembered vividly how painful the previous visit had been for her. I also wondered if she was psychologically "trapped" (how easy it was to say that then!) in the fact of her daughter's murder and would be unable to share with me about little beyond that. Finally, I tracked her down on an impulse in October 2004 and hesitantly knocked on her door. Thus began for me a more profound process of understanding the full context and effects of these crimes – a process that at one point also left me psychologically trapped. It has taken me a long time to appreciate the fact that violence changes the people who write about it as well as the ones who experience it.

I ended up staying in the Juárez region for eighteen months and still go back periodically, most recently for two weeks in January 2009. The journey to get to know the city and gain deeper insight into its myriad social problems is an ongoing process. In this manuscript I do not attempt to “solve” the women’s murders by focusing on who is killing them (the short answer to that is, many people). This is not a piece of investigative journalism, at least not in the traditional sense; that is not the type of research or writing genre that I think can truly help us understand the killings’ roots. In other words, I do not view the Juárez women’s murders – not the ones that have seemed to be related to each other or the many others that have been subsumed in the official death count – as “true crimes,” where the ultimate goal in an investigation is to name the killer. I view them instead as *social crimes* that reveal a lot about a new kind of sociality that is under construction in Ciudad Juárez as it is in many other corners of the world. In short, the ongoing slaughter of impoverished women is a complex, socially engrained and metastasizing form of global violence for which the intuitive question of who’s killing them sheds only minimal insight.

True, the women’s murders in Juárez have taken some distinct dimensions not yet witnessed in the killings committed in any other city or country, which helps explain why Juárez has shouldered most of the bad reputation. Nowhere else has seen the finding of mass graves or cryptically mutilated bodies. For instance, Guatemala, where 2,500 girls and women were killed violently between 2004 and

2007,¹ appears to have the highest incidence of female murders worldwide. But even those crimes do not involve the uncanny daylight abductions of Ciudad Juárez, nor the physical resemblance among some of the victims, nor the high-level government campaigns to ignore or discredit the crimes, nor the recurring imprisonment of innocents as local prosecutors rush to retire the files as quickly. And nowhere have the sequences of events involving individual murders and criminal investigations taken such surreal twists; in that sense, Juárez is in a class of its own and merits a separate analysis.

When people try to understand the *why* of these murders, three easy targets come to mind: machismo, free trade and corruption, and there is a kernel of truth in each of those explanations. It *is* fair to argue that Mexico suffers from a historically rooted and particularly destructive culture of male authority and sexism that gets expressed in many forms – not just in the sanctity of the home, but on the street and in every educational, commercial, political and social institution. It is also true that Juárez is a city that epitomizes some of the worst effects of globalization, especially in the form of a silent, desperate level of poverty that is nonetheless masked by the city's relatively low official unemployment figures and its high influx of capital. And it is accurate to say that Mexico has a well-polished tradition of government corruption that seriously contributes to the degradation of the rule of law. Yet these factors are convenient

¹ "Hidden in Plain Sight: Violence Against Women in Mexico and Guatemala." Washington Office on Latin America Special Report. March 2007.

discursively because they provide deceptively easy rationales for the women's murders, which go something like this: In Juárez, nobody cares about women. In Juárez, men are lashing out because women have jobs and are gaining independence. In Juárez, the justice system is so tainted that criminals kill at will.

For all of these forms of violence that affect poor women most acutely, they alone do not explain the mass assassination of women. Women have been achieving economic independence in other Mexican cities and other patriarchies for decades, with varying results. Instead it's necessary to explore how the forces of human anonymity, aggrieved masculinity and government impunity work together in ways that can be counter-intuitive to how we understand them. For instance, in this thesis I argue that it is not women but *other men* who have more substantially challenged the gender status of males in destabilized societies such as Ciudad Juárez, forcing them to prove their manhood in ways that include sexist and sexual crime. We cannot ignore the precariousness of work available to men; the daily choice they must make between menial, increasingly scarce jobs or involvement in a proliferation of underground economies, where the only arbiter of justice is physical force. This kind of gender model is furthermore structured around a series of performances: a man retains and reasserts his manliness through the enactment of violence. Indeed, violence and terror increasingly are the choice weapons of organized crime, employ indiscriminately against both the State and its civilians. These tactics in turn perpetuate government impunity and push citizens into silence and anonymity.

This emerging culture of violence, intimidation and fear is not unique to Ciudad Juárez. It is increasingly reflected along most of the 1,192-mile United States-Mexico border and in other geographic regions that function as “border zones” between countries, local and global interests, traditional and modern cultures, State and economic powers, and between the rule of law and the law of the streets. Again, conditions in Guatemala illustrate this point. Central America is quickly becoming one of the most contested and embattled territories in the world, serving as it does as a key transshipment point for the northward movement of people and drugs and the southern flow of American currency and weapons. Some Guatemalans know the United States as intimately as they know Guatemala, including economic migrants and members of transnational gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha, a number of whom were raised on American soil but broke the law and were deported south to a place they had never called home. Thirty-six years of civil war weakened both the government and civil society so much that the movement of capital has had no trouble exacting its influence either officially (through international trade) or unofficially (in the form of transnational organized crime). It is within this delicately and dangerously calibrated power structure that men must come to terms with their communities, with themselves and with the opposite sex.

None of these seemingly abstract issues is irrelevant to the women’s murders in Juárez or to the fact that 15-year-old Esmeralda Herrera Monreal was abducted, raped and killed. And they are not unrelated to how her mother Irma has

experienced Mexican womanhood through her childhood years in a small agricultural community in north central Mexico, her attempts to find love and to be a good wife, her experiences of motherhood, her decision to flee domestic violence, her days cleaning other women's homes and assembling American products, and her transfiguration into one of the "Mothers of Juárez." All of these experiences cannot be contemplated in isolation of the bigger forces that are reshaping our world, or we miss the point. Who killed Esmeralda? I'm convinced we will never know the answer, but what we can know is *why it was possible that she was killed.*

The road to this manuscript has been long and often overwhelming and painful. Along the way, one of the questions I have struggled to answer is why I took on this project. Everyone who decides to engage politically, intellectually or artistically with the women's killings in Juárez seems to do it for a different reason. The photojournalist Julián Cardona, a friend I made in Juárez who produced a photographic exhibit based on the murders, once suggested to me that each of us discovers our personal cause in the subject. It would follow that some of us do our work as a form of protest against globalization and the maquiladoras; some of us a challenge to the Mexican government; some of us in an attempt to defend the poor; some of us to speak up for abused women everywhere. A white female scholar even hinted to me once that some of us Mexican-American women

do it because of our ethnicity, to work through feelings of guilt for having ended up on this side of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Additionally, there is sometimes mistrust of those of us who have worked on the subject journalistically. The assumption is that writing about the murders is the ultimate journalistic coup: It is sexy, it fascinates and disturbs, it sells. A few times while making academic presentations, I've been asked pointedly how my commitment to the project changed once I began working as an anthropologist, which I took as an insinuation that my prior work as a journalist must have been inferior or deficient. I do believe those of us who have addressed the subject journalistically and then returned to it in various capacities – as writers, researchers, activists or artists – have cared about the subject for reasons far beyond its marketability. I have witnessed this time and time again. Five years into my research, I am still sorting through my own motivations. As both a writer and a scholar, I felt a responsibility to produce something fresh, to offer some ideas that might take us a bit further in understanding the murders. It was a challenge to eliminate the background noise; at one point I had to refrain from reading every book, watching every play and film and listening to every song about the crimes in order to figure out what I was trying to say. Ultimately, I decided that what I could best contribute based on my background and the opportunity I had to spend a significant amount of time in Juárez was a sort of “testimony from the ground”: a collection of stories, experiences and reflections that begin to shed some light on

the set of questions I outline below. In this sense, my work remains both journalistic and anthropological.

I trace a relationship between the killing of women and the dramatically rising tide of male homicides all along the U.S.-Mexican border, and between both of these groups of murders and the everyday violence increasingly witnessed throughout Central and some parts of South America. In my view, these different but related expressions of violence reveal a profound transformation in the political and economic structuring of the world that has produced deadly cultural dynamics in geographic sites where these transformations are most acute and contradictory. “Grasp” is perhaps an appropriate word to describe my intellectual hold on the subject – the arguments I present here are tentative, the result of years of research and reflection which often made me feel as though I was going in loops. What I am attempting to examine is an emerging social problem, the result of a transfigured world in the process of becoming, and there is no master theorist – no De Certeau or Bourdieu or even a Deleuze or Guattari – in whose work I found an illuminating theoretical framework. Mentors advised me to theorize “from the ground.” The theoretical backbone of this project, then, is a bit of a hodgepodge: It is based largely on reflections derived from my experiences in Juárez as well as from journalistic work I have carried out elsewhere along the U.S.-Mexican border on the subject of drug violence and human smuggling. Intellectually I have borrowed from such seemingly unrelated bodies of knowledge as sociologist Robert Connell’s work on violence and hegemonic

masculinities, geographer Linda McDowell's interventions in feminist geography and journalist Moisés Naím's writings on the growing networks of illicit global commerce.²

I advance my arguments along three lines, through the social categories of gender, territory, and power. First, I consider some of the gendered realities in Ciudad Juárez, focusing on the lives of four women in particular: Esmeralda, her mother Irma, Esmeralda's older sister Cecilia, and her younger sister Zulema. A tight-knit group, each has had a different experience and understanding of Mexican womanhood. After reflecting on their experiences and the various forms of violence in their lives, I turn to what eventually became a more pivotal concern: the question of men. Although for this manuscript I did not have an opportunity to collect personal stories and testimonies from men, my interest in the male condition revolves around what I identify as an emergent form of masculinity on the border epitomized by the woman killer. This new "man" relies on public, spectacular, gendered violence in order to reassert his authority in times of profound social, economic and political destabilization. His is a type of "hyper-masculinity" (for lack yet of a better term) influenced by the logics and style of the military and of organized crime, which have historically had and continue to have a strong presence on the U.S.-Mexican border. And as I argued above, it is

² See for example Connell's *Masculinities* (Polity Press, 2005); McDowell's *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Polity Press, 1999); and Naím's *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy* (Anchor Books, 2006).

performative – it requires the repeated performance of gendered violence in order to preserve itself. This social condition affects both men with and without power, an argument that allows me to make a crucial link between murder cases in which the killers were most likely involved with organized crime and those where the assassin was a disempowered man who acted on his own.

Secondly, I advance an argument about territoriality, which concerns the movement of people and the struggle for control of social space. The fact that Juárez is located on the border with a wealth-producing country makes its land extremely valuable and its layout critically important. I first began to understand how the city's spatiality determines public security when my colleague Julián Cardona described his native city to me as a patchwork of "*poros y pandillas*," pores and gangs. Many of the young women who were killed in the 1990s and who were murdered during the time I lived in the region from January 2004 to June 2005 were making their way across the city when they were disappeared: They were on their way to school, to work, to study with a friend. After they were abducted and victimized their bodies were discarded in empty lots in the city or on expanses of private land on the outskirts, zones which remain undeveloped and unpatrolled as a result of the political interests and relationships that shape urban planning and public safety in Juárez. The parts of the city that *are* developed, meanwhile, in the majority of cases consist of low-income residential neighborhoods which are violently contested by hundreds of associations of young men with few social and employment opportunities. Furthermore, the city is laid

out in such a way that the high schools, maquiladora business parks and commercial centers where young women study and work force them to traverse great stretches of public space. Given that most poor women in Juárez lack private transportation, the city quickly emerges as a dangerous spatial grid. It is crucial that we understand how a multitude of interests both large and small shape the terrain upon which men and women move about and forge their everyday lives, including those of political and business elites, land developers, organized criminal associations and members of law enforcement, since all of them help determine how gender and power are constructed through territorial practices. Ultimately, my argument is that how we plan and organize cities in border zones has profound implications for the physical safety and integrity of the people who live in them.

Finally, I am interested in questions of social power, and I argue that the sexual murder of women in Juárez is just one manifestation of power in 21st-century border zones. It is a type of power with both political and economic dimensions that emerges in the interstices between global capital, the State, and what I tentatively call the “secondary State” of organized transnational crime.³ New forms of authority emerge in this space where traditional models of governance fail, and it’s a form that alarms me because of its reliance on violence

³ A colleague recently argued against using the term “secondary” or “parallel” State, saying that it ignores the ways in which what seems like extralegal forms of power operate through existing government institutions. I agree with her that they do, but I also believe that transnational crime organizations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have created their own structures, logics and institutions which we cannot ignore.

and terror as strategies for its establishment and preservation. Ironically, the increased fluidity and permeability of national borders has begun to produce more authoritarian expressions of power to fill the gaps, manifesting itself in ways that include the sexual killing of women and the torture and murder of men. This power does not obliterate the traditional model of the State but instead feeds off it, while also feeding off of the proliferation of opportunities for legal and illegal commerce in the global marketplace. Because at this time we seem to lack the legal frameworks to help contain this power and the conceptual tools to understand it, my biggest hope for this project is that it begins to push our thinking in that direction.

Why rely on anthropology for this task? Because these new political and economic power arrangements express themselves through culture. By culture, I refer to the forms of sociality and self-identity available to people in everyday life; to understand why violence in Ciudad Juárez was expressed through the sexual victimization of women, we have to understand it in its specific time and place. And, why journalism, particularly narrative journalism? The first reason I have continued to employ journalistic and narrative strategies is that, as anthropologist Michael Jackson suggests, the act of telling stories allows us to repair the intersubjective bonds with society that violence destroys. "In telling a story with others," he writes, "one reclaims some sense of agency, recovers some sense of purpose, and comes to feel that the events that overwhelmed one from without

may be brought within one's grasp."⁴ The second is that I believe in the power of story to transcend social difference and disciplinary boundaries – I believe, in other words, in its power to move. This is why I have tried to contain most of my overt theorization within this introduction. Eventually, I hope I can arrive at a mode of writing that is accessible and that does not rely on specialized language to elucidate such complicated social realities as those in Juárez.

A more flexible form of writing also acknowledges that this project required me to undertake a journey that extended beyond journalism and anthropology: It forced me to undergo a deeply personal, sometimes visceral process of understanding. At times it was profoundly painful, and I found myself asking questions that escaped the social, such as questions about human suffering and the meaning of life. Some of those reflections are not explicitly laid out in this thesis but they inform it, and sometimes seep to the surface without consent. This project has changed me and my understanding of the world in ways I could not have foreseen. Although I am still sorting through that, I know that it has also changed my journalism and my scholarship.

⁴ Jackson, Michael. 2002. *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press. p. 36.

Part 1:

Journey to Juárez

Telling Stories

“Who somebody is or was,” Hannah Arendt once wrote, “we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he is or was.”⁵

I am trying to draw out a story from Irma. In the jumble of events that make up her life, I am looking for order: some semblance of a journey. Are not all good stories about journeys? But Irma is caught up in the fact of Esmeralda’s murder. Although three years have passed since the death, she continues to relive the feelings and memories, wants to rehash the same issues with me: the sense of devastation she cannot manage to shake off, how perfect Esmeralda was (unlike Irma’s six other children), her certainty that life will never be the same.

We have come a long way since we first met during my two-week visit to Ciudad Juárez in January 2003. When I returned the following year, this time to do extended research, I hesitated to look for her for a long time. I remembered her grief when she had told us about Esmeralda on that prior visit; how she could not put words to her experience, how I had felt that this opened up a vast space between us. I wondered if I could ever really understand her, if she would trust me and understand my motivations for coming back. Still, months into my fieldwork, I talked myself into tracking down her home on Calle Grulla once more and was

⁵ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

surprised when I knocked on her door and her face immediately appeared on the other side of a screen. Thus began our relationship. For months all we did was sit at her kitchen table while I tried, however vainly it seemed for a long time, to find some meaning in the many painful experiences that had made up her life. There were at least two major obstacles to my progress. First, Irma was simply not used to talking about herself, and second, she was at a point in her life where everything lacked significance to her: she was struggling just to continue living.

In approaching the confounding task of writing about people whose lives were mired in violence and grief, I struggled to find a way through. During my first months in Juárez I tried to build relationships with various mothers of female murder victims; I had thought that an amalgamation of personal stories might do more justice to the subject. After some eight months in the field, however, I began to feel that my approach was keeping me from getting to know any one family well enough. I also worried that I would end up doing in my writing what I had seen other writers do: to trap the mothers in their role as victims, to portray them only as grieving subjects. I wanted both to understand the finer ways in which violence and loss is experienced and to portray the broader personal and social context in which that unfolded and gained meaning. I asked myself questions like: What did it mean to lose a daughter for an economically marginalized woman who had moved to Juárez to start a new life? With what other experiences of violence did their loss resonate? How did it inform her sense of womanhood and the sense of womanhood of other girls and women in the family? How did it alter their

relationships with themselves and with society? In short, I wanted to know who these women had been before, during and after their daughters and sisters were murdered. The problem, as I came to learn, is that violence obliterates any neat sense of before, during and after; it disturbs, temporarily if not long-term, one's understanding of time and space.

This is why I urged Irma to tell me stories. I hoped that storytelling would allow us, however briefly, to escape the brutality and injustice of Esmeralda's death. Maybe it would help Irma reassemble some of the pieces of her shattered life. Maybe it would help me to understand her better. In retrospect, I can see why storytelling became a lifeline for both of us, for the telling of stories offers us a way out of the darkness of violence; it restores in us some sense of possibility, some glimmer of hope. As anthropologist Michael Jackson has suggested, stories "enable us to regain some purchase over the events that confound us, humble us, and leave us helpless, salvaging a sense that we have some say in the way our lives unfold."⁶ Storytelling repairs the bonds that violence tears apart, making connectedness – what Jackson calls "intersubjectivity" – possible again.

And so I asked Irma to tell me stories, stories that might weave Esmeralda's murder into the larger tapestry of her life and into the deeper problem of gendered violence. I prompted her with questions hoping that the stories they elicited would help me connect with her and would help her reconnect with the world she had

⁶ Jackson, Michael. *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002, p. 17.

become detached from the day Esmeralda disappeared, a world that included her other children.

One of the things I have learned from this project is that ethnographers who write about victims of violence and trauma often walk a delicate line: We function not just as observers, but as mediators between the subjective (our informants) and the social (the context in which their violent experiences transpire and make sense). In asking them to tell us about their lives, we participate in a larger process by which they draw themselves out of their individual silences and back into community. But the process cuts both ways. That process is dialectical and the stories that emerge are coauthored, even if the power relationship between ethnographer and informant remains imbalanced. By drawing out her story, Irma and I tried to reassemble the pieces of her life into a mosaic that made sense, in part to refute the senselessness of her daughter's murder. We attempted to find significance in it as a way to counter the sense of meaninglessness that various forms of violence have had on her life. We tried, as Hanna Arendt might have said, to give Irma a biography.

Irma has a difficult time telling her story from beginning to end because the beginning, her early childhood, brings back some dark memories. Her mother abandoned her when Irma was seven or eight years old. It was her first experience of betrayal, the first time that someone made her feel unworthy, a theme that would reemerge throughout life. She won't even discuss it. All she will tell me is:

“I don’t have any nice memories of my mother. I don’t have anything good to say about her, Ceci.”

Although she was born in 1960, in the same farming community where her mother was raised, called Rancho Grande, in the north central state of Zacatecas, Irma’s autobiography begins somewhere around 1967 or 1968, when her grandmother and an uncle took her and three of her siblings in. These are the people she called “father” and “mother.” Her grandmother was a strong, self-reliant woman with an entrepreneurial spirit. She would bring clothing and other goods from the big cities to Rancho Grande and sell them for a profit. In time, she’d build a small business empire that included farmlands and dairy cows. She was the first person in the community to own a stove, and once electricity reached Rancho Grande she also purchased a toaster, a blender and a mixer, as well as a black-and-white television that neighbors would come by and stare at in wonder. Irma’s uncle, which is to say her father, was also very caring. He bought her a small aluminum pitcher which he topped with warm froth when he was milking the family’s cows. “Only milk for you,” he’d say, warning her that coffee would make her skin darker. Irma was the darkest-skinned of the sisters. Her uncle referred to her “*mi prieta*,” my little dark one.

Later the family decided to try their luck in Mexico City. Irma loved the bustle of the nation’s capital. Her uncle took a job in a bakery, but when he was off he took Irma and her siblings to see the city’s many impressive sights. They played in Deer Park, known as the “*Parque de los Venados*,” which was dotted

with trees and a manmade lake; he took them to the lush Xochimilco Gardens and to the ancient Basilica of Guadalupe. Then tragedy struck. The bakery where Irma's uncle worked caught on fire: his stiff, charred body was found in the back of building. The family returned to Zacatecas in mourning, but soon returned with a widowed aunt in tow. Irma's grandmother found a promising spot in a busy alleyway and set up a stand where she sold chunks of cantaloupe, watermelon, pineapple and mango sprinkled with orange-red chili powder.

Irma was back in Rancho Grande by the time she was fourteen, and found herself yearning for something more – an American way of life that might save her from the dreary rural reality she was back to. White American families would visit Zacatecas City to see its pink sandstone colonial-era buildings, and during side trips to Rancho Grande and the nearby municipal head of Fresnillo, they struck the locals as being very kind. They bought candies and cartons of milk for the children and young women of Rancho Grande. They convinced some of them to return to the United States with them and offered them employment as housekeepers and nannies in places like Los Angeles. Many of them never returned; word came back that they had married and started their own families. Irma was itching to go, but her grandmother refused. Instead, she did what was expected of girls her age: she entered the fields, stooping for long hours each day to pick corn, tomatoes, beans, and Rancho Grande's trademark product: poblano, serrano and jalapeño peppers.

That same year, she fell in love for the first time. His name was Juan Antonio Herrera, a young man from Rancho Grande whom people knew as Toño.

He was industrious, a hardworking farmer who owned some land. Irma had never been with a man; she had not even felt the touch of one. But this is how things worked for young women in rural Mexico in the 1970s: You looked for a young man who could support you and your life went from being a dutiful daughter to a dutiful wife. It was not unusual for girls to marry that young; your own family could only support you so long and, having been denied an education or any other way out, living independently was not an option. Instead of having a *quinceañera* like Mexican girls of better means who celebrated their fifteen birthday with food and dancing, Irma's coming of age was marked by a quiet trip to the local judge's chambers, where she signed away her childhood innocence and fantasies.

The delicate and symbolic nature of my evolving relationship with Irma was not lost on me. I listened to her anecdotes about life in Rancho Grande with a feeling of recognition. My mother, too, was raised in a poor farming community in northern Mexico. The property was called Rancho San Pedro, after her great-grandfather Pedro Hinojosa, who had received it from the government as compensation for his leadership in the military. When my mother was growing up, farming was beginning to fade as a profitable way of life in the Mexican countryside, and partitioning of the property among Pedro Hinojosa's children had reduced Rancho San Pedro to a small patch of land made up of the main house and some modestly sized fields behind it. Education was scarce – six or seven years of schooling if one was lucky – and marriage seemed the only option for climbing

out of such dire poverty. It was hard not to see my mother's story reflected in Irma's plight. Both of them went on to work in the maquiladoras and as housekeepers, and both spent their lives struggling to spare their children the same fate.

The theme of mothers and daughters unfolded between Irma and me in other ways. Her oldest daughter, who is four years younger than me, shares my name. The two were somewhat estranged when I first met their family. Irma often complained to me about "Ceci," as she called both of us. In her eyes, Cecilia was cold and uncaring. She never displayed much affection for her mother and had grown even more distant since marrying and having two children. Irma never tired of pointing out how her daughter-in-law Juanis was more attentive towards her than her own daughter. Her judgment of Cecilia seemed harsh to me. Although I tried to remind myself that I was there to listen, I sometimes found myself suggesting that there might be another reason for the tension. When I finally got to know Cecilia better, my suspicions were confirmed. In the meantime, however, it didn't escape me that my relationship with Irma sometimes resembled that of a stand-in daughter. While we maintained a degree of formality – to this day we both refer to each other as *usted* – I became the one who listened, who cared to know Irma as more than a mother. This is the same role that Esmeralda had played in her life: she was not just a daughter, she was a friend and confidant. As Irma grieved her daughter and I dealt with the loneliness of fieldwork, we found some solace in the other's company.

And yet, our lives were so different. I was the emblem of what could've been: the daughter of the woman who did manage to escape her reality. I remember once, how the mother of another teenage murder victim studied me and her eyes grew sad. Her daughter's father had become a legal resident of the United States but had refused to take his daughter with him. "She could've gotten an education and been like you," the mother told me. I had the car and the resources to travel to Irma's hometown, something she could hardly afford to do. On days when I couldn't muster the courage to face the city or when my heart felt particularly heavy, I hid in my quiet apartment across the bridge in El Paso. Even seeking support for these troubles reminded me of my privilege: didn't Irma need it much more than I did? The constant shuttling between worlds was itself part of the ethnographic exercise. It gave me a sense of the schizophrenic existence of poor Mexicans in border communities who live in the shadows of opportunity – constantly reminded of its possibility, but never really permitted to touch it.

The abuse began immediately. Eight days into their marriage – she remembers this vividly – he dealt the first blow. The degree of violence only escalated after that. In retrospect, Irma can see that her husband viewed her as his possession and felt it necessary to exert his absolute control. One of the ways he achieved this was by humiliating her in front of others. Irma reconstructs the first incident: He is sitting in the patio with his parents and three sisters while she finishes dressing inside the three-bedroom house they have built for themselves.

She had been fond of short skirts before marriage and decides to wear one of them today, thinking it will please her new husband. It is pink and circular. She pairs it with knee-high boots. She admires herself in her stylish outfit, thinks her husband will be equally pleased. But when she walks to the patio for him to see, the excitement dissipates. He studies her for a few seconds. Then, without saying a word, he reached for the edge of her skirt and tears it off her body. Irma feels her legs go bare. She recalls the indignity viscerally: she wishes the earth would open up and swallow her. She runs back inside the house and hides in their bedroom. It will be hours before she stops crying.

Within a year Irma had borne her first child, a sickly boy she named Antonio, after her father. Adrián came when Toño was only 13 months old. While her husband worked the fields, Irma struggled to care for the babies alone. Toño's ailments required frequent visits to doctors' offices and hospitals, but she found it hard to ride the buses with a child in each arm. Sometimes she'd leave Adrian at home alone though he was months old; she didn't own a crib and had to hope he wouldn't roll off the bed. Once she came home and found him lying in excrement that had leaked from the side of his cloth diaper. The baby had stuffed his dirtied hand into his mouth. Irma was dejected and overwhelmed.

Three children followed: Cecilia in 1980, Benny four years later, and in 1986, a baby girl she christened Esmeralda, a name she had always found beautiful. During those years the family had moved back and forth between Rancho Grande and Mexico City, where her husband worked in an auto mechanics

shop. His relationship with Irma grew more strained. He threw her against walls, left her arms and legs covered with bruises, made her mouth and nose bleed with his blows. He beat the children, too. The couple stopped speaking to each other – for days at a time, and then weeks, and then months, even as they shared a roof. Irma found herself wishing him death.

One day Irma's sister and sister-and-law asked her to join them in baking some bread that was a Day of the Dead tradition. Irma first fixed dinner for her husband to avoid any problems, but when he arrived and saw her fixing to leave he asked where she was going, so she told him about her plans. "And *who* gave you permission?" he barked. She snapped back, "I'm an adult, I don't have to ask for permission." Her husband threw his fist into her chest. Irma fell backward onto their bed, and for a few seconds she found it impossible to breathe. This filled her with rage and humiliation. Something inside Irma burst that day. She turned to the side and spotted a glass Coke bottle on the nightstand; without second thoughts she grabbed it and struck her husband. He turned around and left the house, shocked. Irma went and joined her sister.

When she returned home that evening she found the door locked. She rattled it, but her husband refused to open. Eventually she gave up, walked around the house and climbed a cement wall, where her children opened a back door for her. The following day her husband's sisters came to her home demanding an explanation, but she snapped her fingers at them and ordered them to leave. Her husband stopped speaking to her and migrated to Los Angeles, where he found

work in construction. He never called or sent money. All of Irma's children except Esmeralda were in school by now, and Irma had to figure out a way to feed them. She took to the fields, bringing the two-year-old girl along with her. She would leave her under a tree with a juice or a Coke and two pieces of sweet bread, and Esmeralda entertained herself as her mother made her way up and down the rows of produce, stooping for hours.

On one of his trips back to Rancho Grande, Irma decided to finalize her separation from her husband and she asked him for a divorce. He refused to give it to her. For all intents and purposes, though, their relationship was over. Providing for her five children alone was a struggle for Irma. By then she was living with her mother, who made a living serving meals in her home for the machine operators who came to Rancho Grande annually from other parts of Mexico to help harvest the crops. Irma began a relationship with one of them. His name was also Juan; he was a Yaqui from Sonora whose features were entirely Indian. It was a relationship born of necessity and kept under wraps. Irma recalled the horrible sensation she felt when she was intimate with him. "I didn't love him, so I felt very strange," she told me. "I felt such an ugly sensation when he'd touch me." Soon the harvest season was over and Juan was off to his next job. But just a few weeks had passed when Irma's world came crashing down: although she says she was using contraceptives, she learned that she was pregnant. She was devastated. "*Se me juntó el cielo con la tierra, Ceci,*" she told me in Spanish. How would she explain this to her children, who knew that she and their father had separated?

What would she tell her mother? And how would she possibly feed an additional mouth?

There was only one thing she could think to do: She spoke with a woman from Rancho Grande who now worked in Ciudad Juárez as a housekeeper. The woman said her boss had a friend who needed help, but Irma would have to move into her home. Irma thought it over and agreed. The plan was that she'd leave her children in her mother's care and work in Juárez just long enough to provide for her sixth child's birth. If she couldn't move to the United States, she would do the next closest thing. She would hedge her bets on the city where so many others had gone when they needed to start over.

Cecilia

One could argue that Cecilia became a woman at age nine, when her mother moved to Juárez and she was left in charge of her younger siblings. Like Irma, Cecilia has a hard time remembering herself as a child. She was still in elementary school, but it was her job to care for and clean up after five-year-old Benny and two-year-old Esmeralda. She would wake up the children and get Benny ready for school, then pick him up when his kindergarten class let out at noon. Then it was her turn to go to school. She recalled those five hours as being the favorite part of her day – the only time she was allowed to dedicate to herself. Her older brothers Toño and Adrián were also in elementary school, but their time outside of class was spent in the fields. At home, the relationship Cecilia

developed with Benny and Esmeralda was of a different nature. "I never saw Esmeralda as a sister," she once told me. "I always felt as though she was my daughter."

Within a year Cecilia was also tasked with helping her father, who had returned from California and was living in the home the family had once shared. When school let out she would clean his house and fix him supper before going home to her grandmother's house. He never invited her to stay and eat. One memory is particularly crushing. Food was scarce at her grandmother's house but plentiful at her father's. One of the rooms held sacks of beans harvested in the fields he still owned, and his cupboards were stocked with groceries. One day Cecilia asked if he would give her some beans to take to her grandmother's house and cook for her siblings. But he refused, saying, "no, you're not allowed to take a single glass of water from this house." Cecilia's eyes well up when she shares this with me. Then she laughs as goes on to describe how she got even with him. When she finished cooking – having seen that he was lying on his bed – she opened her backpack and quietly filled it with two small bags of Mexican pasta, some tomatoes, an onion, several cubs of chicken bouillon, and a spoonful of lard which she scooped onto a tortilla wrapper. "I'm leaving," she called out to her father. "*Andele, pues,*" he replied. She went home and happily handed the groceries over to her grandmother. When she asked the girl where she had gotten them, Cecilia said, "My father gave them to me." After that day she never returned to his house.

Part 2:

Eight Bodies

Day 1: November 6, 2001

The case of Esmeralda's murder, like most of the cases of hundreds of women assassinated in Ciudad Juárez, begins with a small mystery. *El Diario* and *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, two of the state's leading newspapers, say that the man who found her body was José Luis Ayala Ramírez, but *El Norte*, the competition, calls him José Aguilar Ramírez. In any case, his name matters little; he is insignificant in a city as vast and anonymous and busy as this one. He is insignificant even though the crime will make headlines across the world for years to come.

He'll quickly get erased from the historical record. He's a bricklayer, and his only role in the deeply complicated saga of murdered women in Juárez is to walk upon Esmeralda, the first of the "cotton field bodies" (as they will come to be known). He fulfills this minor role when he ambles across an urban lot in the northwest part of the city on a rainless Tuesday morning and smells death. Maybe he doesn't immediately recognize it as death, but there's no way of knowing that now, because he quickly melts back into the Juárez streets, denying anyone but a handful of cops the chance to ask him what really happened. And nobody in Juárez trusts the cops, anyway.

I've spent years now thinking about Esmeralda's death. The curiosity begins with the appalling thought of eight savagely murdered girls on an urban lot in a city that rubs against our country. I'm hardly the only one who wants to know

precisely what happened in that field, but unlike others, I've never intended to uncover the killer.

I'm a native of the same border between Mexico and Texas. I understand that here, potentially polemical murders are a bit like mirages; they disappear quickly, leaving almost no trace of their occurrence and certainly no known culprits. Yet the cotton field murders live on – hauntingly so. And as I poked around the city, talked to people, read many newspapers and books, my interest began to turn away from who killed them to *why* – an immensely larger question that requires understanding how in essence it was the city of Juárez itself that devoured them. The more I sat at her family's table, the more I also began to wish I had met Esmeralda – known her in the flesh, in all of her zestful humanity. Instead, the place where I'm forced to begin is at a deathly cotton field, where spirits haunt but facts fizzle.

The news reports of that week, which are the closest thing left to a public record (there is also a criminal docket that contains thousands of pages, but that is a story for later), indicate that José Luis Ayala Ramírez – or José Aguilar Ramírez – detected a foul smell as he walked across a concrete bridge over an irrigation ditch cutting north-south down the field. Nobody knows whether he saw hair first, or maybe hands or a leg. The only thing *El Diario* reported the following morning

is that “He ran into the remains of one of the victims and immediately alerted police authorities.”⁷

Empty now, this cotton field lies in an area once known as the Valle de Juárez, where agriculture was king. Today, the valley is home to commercial strips with businesses like Wal-Mart and Applebee’s. An industrial park and country club are nearby, and the field itself sits behind a middle-class housing subdivision called Quintas San José, at the intersection of two grandly named boulevards, Ejército Nacional and Paseo de la Victoria. The street’s names are supposed to evoke Mexico’s small but glorious military history, yet they say more about the country’s future than about its past.

Cars and trucks flow by the intersection at all hours: most rattle and sputter, but a few glide by sleek as snails. Juárez is a city of vehicles, of transportation, movement: It stands for change, progress, social mobility. Here, the poor can find jobs, and single mothers can make it on their own: in the Mexican imaginary, it’s almost as good as being in America. Across Paseo de la Victoria from the cotton field are the modern, brightly colored offices of the Association of Maquiladoras, a group that represents several hundred foreign-owned factories in Juárez, blocky concrete tilt-ups where rows upon rows of workers churn out billions of dollars in car harnesses, refrigerators, and radios each day. That someone was still planting cotton in the heart of an industrial city at the start of the twenty-first century is not

⁷ Rodríguez, Armando. “Matan a 3 mujeres.” *El Diario*. 7 Nov. 2001. A1.

so much an anachronism as a throwback to the city's nostalgic rural past – and an emblem of its jagged, confounding pattern of urban development since then.

So, this bricklayer senses this horrible smell and comes upon this girl who is dead (our Esmeralda). Her hands have been tied at her waist with a shoelace, and all the flesh on her face is gone. He alerts the police, who come to the scene and begin their investigation. Before long, as they walk the length of the ditch, they stumble upon two other bodies. The death toll is now at three. It's a macabre finding, yet the agents recognize the sight: The victims are in their teens, slim, with brown skin. Some of their legs are flexed. The bound hands are familiar. At least since 1993, bodies have shown up this way periodically: There were the six girls found in September 1995 in the mostly empty land south of the city known as the Lote Bravo, and the seven found the following year in Lomas de Poleo, not far from the border with El Paso, Texas.⁸ Yet, this fall morning, November 6, 2001, many in Juárez had thought or at least hoped the killing of women in their city was over. There were, after all, men behind bars: The Egyptian (Abdel Latif Sharif) and members of the gangs known as "The Rebels" and "The Bus Drivers" – men with tattooed arms and nicknames like "El Mocho," "El Diablo," "El Tolteca," and "Charly El Bailarín." The Chihuahua government's storyline about how those gang members were behind the killings had made little sense, anyway, and if there was no proof beyond the authorities' word, there was no hard proof that someone out there was still murdering women systematically.

⁸ Rodríguez, Armando. "Buscan más cuerpos." *El Diario*. Nov. 9, 2001. A1.

In the past five years, the bricklayers, children and other innocent passersby who usually come upon the bodies had stumbled across more human remains, but not a mass grave.

These murders on this gray Tuesday morning were evidently interlinked. Quite possibly, they were even connected to some of the murders from years past. The bodies had been deposited (depending on which newspaper account one believes) three or thirty or perhaps two hundred meters apart along that ditch, which had no water and was lined by elm trees. Once the cops began their work (because murder in Mexico is a state crime), they radioed for back-up from the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Investigation of Homicides of Women – a special arm of the Chihuahua Attorney General's Office that members of the state Congress had created in 1998 to bring an end to these ghastly murders. The office had yet to find any killers in the higher-profile murders (domestic disturbances and so-called "crimes of passion" aside), but in Mexico, law enforcement agencies are deeply territorial about their legal jurisdictions. In this case, though violence is Ciudad Juárez's specialty, this was no simple crime: This was a job for the Chihuahua state government.

Back then as now, nobody agreed on how many women had been murdered in Juárez before that Tuesday morning. Activists and journalists and public authorities all cited different figures. Numbers, some were finding out, were powerful things, like currency. They could be used as bargaining chips with the

government or flaunted in the media to rally citizens to particular beliefs and actions. There was consensus that twenty-one women had been killed so far in 2001, but that number didn't include a woman who'd been found dead in an *hotel de paso*, the cheaply priced hotels used for love affairs and other brief encounters.

⁹ Indeed, the question in Juárez has always been who counts as a victim; there are all kinds of factors, especially moralizing ones, that disqualify people in *hoteles de paso*, prostitutes, or women who were on the verge of breaking up with their boyfriends or leaving their husbands.

This year, the majority of the victims had been under twenty years old and worked in the *maquiladoras*. Twenty-seven women had died the year before. The number, however, that carried the most weight for the NGO's and provoked the strongest reactions among public audiences was the tally one of the groups had been keeping since 1993: In seven years, 259 women had been murdered, 79 of them sexually. The number became even more handy when it was rounded up to 300, especially in the press (which was probably fair given the shoddy accounting system). Three hundred women murdered in nine years was a systemic, social and political problem.

In two important ways, the cotton field murders marked a departure from previous cases. Other bodies had been dumped mostly on empty stretches of land along the southern and western peripheries of the growing city. They'd been found

⁹ Cano C., Luis Carlos. "Encuentran en Juárez otros 5 cuerpos de mujeres asesinadas." *El Universal*. 8 Nov. 2001. B10.

in repeated locations, but always one at a time. That the three victims found in the cotton field had been left by one of Juárez's busiest intersections was a loud statement: It was the ultimate act of defiance in a city known for defiance. If violence indeed works as a method of communication, these murders of women were trying to say something new and different. But what?

As the government's people talked to the press, each of the girls began to acquire an identity that reduced her to mere limbs and clothing. The papers reported that Esmeralda – who was anonymous still - had been found wearing nothing but torn white socks, and that her hands had been tied up behind her back with the shoelaces from her sneakers. The authorities figured she'd been dead somewhere between 15 and 30 days. The second girl's body said little about who she was because of its state of decomposition: She'd been dead for months and was nothing but bones and long hair. The third girl, meanwhile, had been covered over with branches and had died somewhere between two and three weeks ago. The desert weather had turned her skin to cardboard, but she had a crown in one of her upper left teeth that might serve as a clue to her identity.¹⁰

As the day progressed, the mothers of Juárez's disappeared began showing up at the corner lot. Having heard news about the bodies, they hitched rides with neighbors or mounted public buses and appeared at the cotton field in droves. By then the murders were an open wound in the city. At the time, the city's registry

¹⁰ Olivas, Juan de Dios. "Vuelve asesino en serie." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. 7 Nov. 2001. A1.

listed dozens of missing girls and women. Some of those on the list had eventually returned home, but for the mothers of those who had vanished indefinitely, every report of a new body provoked the same knot in the throat and freezing of time. Panicked, heartbroken, bewildered or numb, today they came at stood behind the yellow police tape in hope of answers. Others went directly to the state government's squat headquarters across the city, where they prodded the special prosecutor and her staff for information. They asked if they could view the scraps of clothing that had turned up as more than a hundred agents from all three levels of government combed the 400-square-meter field where the bodies appeared. By the end of the day, two potential matches had been made. The authorities said they believed the first two bodies belonged to Claudia Ivette González, a young *maquiladora* employee, and a 15-year-old student named Brenda Esmeralda Herrera Monreal.

Day 2: November 7, 2001

Wednesday morning, as the people of Juárez continue to digest the news, the local newspapers scream their worst fear.

Serial Killer Returns . . . Three Women are Found Dead . . . In what appears to be a new wave of serial crimes, the bodies of three women, apparently killed on different dates and showing signs of sexual attack, were found yesterday morning in an irrigation canal in the middle of a cotton field.¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.

At the moment, it seems, what other explanation can there be for a mass grave but a serial murderer? Women's and girls' bodies don't show up in public places out of nowhere. Mexico does not think of itself as a country that kills its women, especially as grotesquely as the Juárez victims have been murdered over the past years. The collective line of reasoning arrives thus at pathology: Somebody must be sick in the head. Besides, while there isn't much of a recorded history of serial murders in Mexico, an American-style killer makes sense in a border city that in many ways looks north more than south for its identity.

The idea of a serial killer also gains footing, I think, because it gives Juárez and the state of Chihuahua a common cause to fight against. It's Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, against its serial killer: Juárez versus evil itself. Even if the rest of the country identifies Juárez as a place where evil lives – a city of vice that thrives on dance halls and drugs and alcohol – its residents see a large difference between moral promiscuity and murder. If the killings are the work of a psychopath, *juarenses* can still position themselves as being good. At the least, it assures them they themselves could never carry out such brutal attacks against the most vulnerable members of their society. One government official conjectures, "This is the work of a psychopath, of a serial killer, because after killing one woman, he realized that the body had not been found and returned to kill a second, and less than fifteen days ago, he killed a third."¹² The authorities think the killers drove the women to the irrigation ditch by using a dirt road that you can get to from

¹² Rodríguez, Armando. "Matan a 3 mujeres." *El Diario*. 7 Nov. 2001. A1.

Paseo de la Victoria or Ejército Nacional, and that they raped and killed them there on different days.¹³

Now that it's the second day of the investigation, there are both forensic workers dusting off evidence with brushes at the crime scene and bulldozers at the ready to remove heavy debris, as sections of the field are regularly used as a dump site by construction companies. About 150 meters from the irrigation ditch there is a drainage canal littered with chunks of cement and other building-project leftovers. The cops searched everywhere but there the previous day.

This morning, as they sift through the rubble just past 11 a.m., the dreadful news spreads: Wrapped in a piece of carpet, another body. They dig some more and find another. And another. And another. And yet another. Eight dead girls.

Quietly, underneath the chaos of crime scenes and newspaper reports, individual stories already are beginning to unfold. For years to come, the killings will continue to have shock effects for particular families, particular lives. The deeper consequences of eight dead girls in a cotton field can only be known with time, by peeling the layers of the event like an onion, and only if one cares about those things to begin with.

Outside a grim-looking building not far from where a five-lane bridge links Juárez and the United States, Irma Josefina González Rodríguez waits in a car for her daughter Mayela to emerge from the city morgue and tell her whether one of

¹³ Ibid.

the girls from Tuesday is their own Claudia Ivette. They have already waited hours the previous afternoon at the state's Northern Field Office and recognized Claudia Ivette's white tank top, her blue *maquiladora* smock, a ponytail holder, and one of her toenails, polished in silver. It was Claudia who had the crown in her tooth – or perhaps not. At this moment, both everything and nothing seems possible.

She was 20 years old and worked the afternoon shift at Lear 173, on Reforma Street. She'd disappeared twenty-eight days ago after being late to work by two minutes – reason for which her managers wrote her up and sent her home. Nobody knows or will say what happened after that. Her mother says Claudia had no money on her because she'd planned on taking the company's private bus home – the buses read *transporte especial*, “special transport,” across the back. According to her family, she was the kind of daughter who would call home just to say that she was going to be late. That day, however, there was no phone call and no Claudia.

Her family members had been contemplating all of the possibilities: Did someone force her into a car, try to rob her, or did she just wander off and vanish in the city, like all those other young women who smile from missing person fliers? There was a consensus that she would've never boarded a car with a stranger at will. Her mother tells the reporters who interview her, “Claudia wasn't fearful, but she was not at all trusting and she was very careful and wouldn't talk to strangers. She was very serious. That's why we can't explain to ourselves how

she could've experienced by day something that never happened to her at night, when she had to walk six blocks just to get home."¹⁴

Claudia's bedroom, her clothes, her favorite objects – they are all intact still. Her family's life has changed drastically since the day she never came home. Irma tells *El Diario*, "Every night we'd go outside and wait with the hope that we'd see her again, but she never arrived, she never came home. We looked for her in all of the hospitals, in the jail. We went to the bank to see if she'd been withdrawing money, but nothing. Then we reported her missing, and by then we were desperate, so we made fliers and put them up all over the city. We went and looked for her at the Cerro Bola and at Lomas de Poleo because we wanted to see if we could find her in whatever way we found her, dead or alive. But we never got anywhere."¹⁵

This is what the paper says in its flowery prose: "In her role as a mother she admits that deep inside, she still has hope that her daughter is alive. That's why she doesn't cry. Her emotions are conflicted. She trembles a lot. She doesn't eat well and she hasn't been able to sleep due to the uncertainty that suffocates her in not knowing whether one of the bodies that was found belongs to Claudia, her only single daughter."

When Mayela finally emerges from the morgue, she tells the reporter who's also waiting for her, "Yes, it's her blouse, I'm sure. It's also her toenail. But none

¹⁴ Sosa, Luz Del Carmen. "El dolor, la incertidumbre." *El Diario*. 8 Nov. 2001. A2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

of the ones they have in there is Claudia. I didn't feel anything when I saw the two bodies. Neither one is my sister."

Patricio Martínez Garza, the governor of Chihuahua, decides that the murder of eight girls in Juárez is the most important crime on his plate that November. Immediately he sends his top prosecutor, the attorney general, a man named Arturo González Rascón, to the border to straighten things out. He promises to commit every resource he has to the investigation, from personnel to technology to logistics. The governor understands how the murders could quickly become a sore spot for his party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), even though when they first began it was the National Action Party (PAN) that was in power. In keeping with Mexican political tradition, Martínez had cleaned house when he stepped into office, replacing even the special prosecutor who was then in charge of the Office for the Investigation of Homicides of Women.

Now, eight victims. The case will come to illustrate how porous power becomes despite – or perhaps because of – the presence of so many bodies of state authority. The U.S.-Mexican border is a place where everyone has a stake – local, state and federal governments in two countries. An occurrence like the cotton field findings can quickly turn into a political football, and everyone who becomes involved plays to win. It is a delicate, diffuse system of authority. To make matters more complex, Mexico's political system may be democratic in principle but in practice it's hierarchical and authoritarian. This means it'll be the dirty job of the

attorney general to protect the governor's image by finding a solution to the problem – and fast.

Arturo González Rascón promises nothing less than justice. He understands that public perception is everything, so he spends a considerable amount of time talking to the press. He wants the people of Juárez to know his job is to make their legal system work. "These last homicides of women will not end with impunity," he promises. "The criminal, or the criminals, will be punished with all the rigor of the law. We can't allow this kind of an offense, which goes against all of society, because not only does it end the victim's lives, but it destroys the peace and tranquility of their families and of an entire city which is dedicated wholeheartedly to work." He pleads with the citizenry to call in any tips, but already there is a silent understanding that nobody is going to come forward. The people of Juárez have learned it's always safer not to cooperate with the government; more than a few witnesses who have tried to help have ended up imprisoned as scapegoats. They recognize the attorney general's calls for cooperation as necessary political theater.

Every state policeman in the northern zone of the Attorney General's Office has soon been assigned to the case, and city and federal agencies have made the obligatory offers to chip in any way they can. The Public Ministry is reportedly sniffing along various lines of investigation; nothing has been ruled out at this

point.¹⁶ Government authorities are examining the log of people who've visited the Egyptian in prison, and they're tracking the members of the old band Los Rebeldes who eventually went free. Or it could be, the secretary of state says, the cotton field murders are proof that Juárez has bred a culture of homicidal copycats.¹⁷

A parade of stakeholders begins to emerge by the second day of the findings, as everyone has something either to gain or to lose from the fact of the murders. The news pages are crowded with other opinions about who's responsible and ideas about how the violence could be stopped. Esther Chávez Cano, the petite feminist firebrand who founded Casa Amiga, the city's first women's crisis center, says she never bought the story about the Egyptian to begin with and doubts the government will get it right this time. "All the authorities have done is to separate the crimes and the killers, by signaling Abdel Sharif, or by saying, these are members of 'The Rebels,' these are from the gang 'The Bus Drivers.' But they've done nothing to arrest the people who are truly responsible."¹⁸ Astrid González, a member of the group Juárez Against Crime,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Piñón Balderrama, David. "Habría reaparecido la 'cultura de imitación.'" *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. 8 Nov. 2001. B.

¹⁸ Cano C., Luis Carlos. "Encuentran en Juárez otros 5 cuerpos de mujeres asesinadas." *El Universal*. 8 Nov. 2001. B10.

says, "The citizens are indignant because the victims from before and the ones today are signs that there is one or several psychopaths who are free."¹⁹

Among politicians, there is buzz over whether the federal government should declare an emergency and take over the investigations. Hortensia Aragón, who is a congresswoman from the leftist Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), thinks the President should do this using the argument that the cotton field murders suggest the involvement of organized crime, which is a federal problem. She says members of the House of Representatives have proposed an agreement that would form an investigative commission like the one the federal government organized to look into the murder of 17 farm workers in Guerrero who were ambushed by state police on their way to a protest in 1995.²⁰

The city's entrepreneurs are not happy with the cotton field bodies, either. They consider it an embarrassment for the city, and a potential detractor for their enterprises. Mario Mora, the director of the Association of Maquiladoras, tells reporters that he is alarmed and horrified, and that it's the government's responsibility to do something to protect the more than 200,000 women who toil in Juárez's factories. The president of the National Chamber of Commerce, a man named Héctor Carreón León, has a different suggestion: "I urge the state government to purge the commanders of the state police."²¹ The local Chamber director wants the three levels of government to work together. He tells *Norte*, "In

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Huerta, Carlos. "Exigen limpia en PJE." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. 8 Nov. 2001. A1.

the industrial sector, this type of situation carries big consequences because it creates a feeling of insecurity among people who come to invest in our country.”²²

The psychology professors of the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez diagnose the problem differently. María Guadalupe López Alvarez believes the crimes are a function of the disintegration of families and society, and worries that the government is unable to maintain public security. Her colleague, psychologist Martha Margarita Pérez, explains that a city like Juárez is inhabited by people from many different cultures, some of them with different pathologies.

“Unfortunately, a lot of the people that arrive at our city are not mentally healthy,” she says, “especially if we consider that a great portion of them come here as personal failures. They come to this city in search of better lives, but as they arrive, they learn that things aren’t served to you on a silver platter here, and their frustration grows.” The typical serial killer, she theorizes, is someone who was abandoned as a child. “A lot of them were victims of child abuse, or they grew up in an unhealthy family environment. That’s the reason they manifest their hate against women.”²³

Finally, the president of the Council of Associations and Colleges of Professionals says his group had offered to help the state government with their investigations in 1998 and 1999, but were turned down. When Arturo González Rascón stepped in as attorney general, the group suggested he use its

²² Ibid.

²³ Salcido, Guadalupe. ““Sociedad debe intervenir; autoridad sin capacidad.”” *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. 8 Nov. 2001. A3.

odontologists, psychologists, criminologists and chemists. Their expertise could've proved invaluable in identifying bodies, developing psychological profiles of the presumed psychopaths and conducting DNA tests. Again, says José Luis Rodríguez, they were rebuffed: "He said they were going to work efficiently."²⁴

Buried in section B of Wednesday's *El Diario* are two news briefs that few readers want to notice, since they hint at the true nature of violence in Ciudad Juárez.

The first one states that four young men ranging from 18 to 22 years old, have admitted before the Public Ministry to gang-raping a 19-year-old girl. The events unfolded early on Sunday morning. According to the report, city police unit #738 pulled over a blue Ford Fiesta with no license plates as it rolled down Puerto Lisboa and Puerto Huelva streets. The cops searched the car and found an unconscious woman who had been stripped of her clothing. An 11-year-old boy who is riding along with them tells the police that all of his friends raped her, and that they were on their way to Tierra Nueva, a stretch of empty land in the southern part of the city, to dump her.

Later, after she comes to, the girl tells the authorities that she is friends with one of the men. She'd gone to the house of some people he knew and drank beer,

²⁴ Chaírez Daniel, Jorge. "'Deben dejar de la política': José Luis Rodríguez.'" *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. 8 Nov. 2001. A2.

then boarded the Fiesta. She remembers nothing after that, except that she woke up at a police station.²⁵

The other short news brief on that page reports that the owners of massage parlors have grown more conscious of the need to protect their employees since two women who worked at a salon called Venus were robbed and raped. These acts of violence – in a city that functions because of its women – transpire daily, at all hours of the day. But they disappear into tiny, irrelevant news print, if they even register in the public record and the public consciousness at all. And it is yet another form of violence against women to let these stories disappear. Is it not possible that Juárez's women are in danger everyday, with or without serial killers in their midst? Is there no sense of the violence of everyday life in the city? These seemingly small incidents suggest that Juárez has something larger on its hands than the killing of women. But the notion of a serial killer allows everyone to ignore the way the city treats its women whether or not they end up dead.

By the end of Wednesday, it is already evident that the government's line of reasoning is not moving in the right direction. It wants a simple crime, but this is about much more. Juárez is burdened with social and economic contradictions; its mistreated women are merely the bodies that bring them to light. What kind of criminology can crack this case?

²⁵ Terrazas Sáenz, Rubén. "Acusan a violadores de intento de homicidio." *El Diario*. 7 Nov. 2001. B7.

Day 3: November 8, 2001

The Chihuahua team is still searching for clues on Thursday. According to *El Diario*, they find teeth, one tennis shoe, and pieces of bone.²⁶ The days are gray and gloomy. The operators of the excavation machines stand nearby, waiting for orders.

The newspapers disclose that, at any given time of the day, only two policemen are assigned to patrol the cotton field, which makes up part of Sector 3-4 in the Western District. Salvador Barreno, the operations coordinator for the General Office for Public Safety, admits that crime prevention was quite poor during the previous political administration.²⁷ This is one of Mexico's gravest problems with regard to public accountability: All ills – political, economic or criminal – are considered a problem of the previous regime, whose staff disappears as soon as someone new steps into power. With the cases of the murdered women, it also means any evidence collected by the regime's investigators vanishes too, so that by the time the eight bodies are found in the cotton field, the killings of 1993, 1995, and 1996 are but blots of memory among government personnel.

A reporter asks residents who live near the field whether they ever witnessed suspicious activities. Guadalupe Gardea, a woman who resides in the apartment complex Moradas del Porvernir, says all she's seen were groups of

²⁶ Rodríguez, Armando. "Buscan más cuerpos." *El Diario*. Nov. 9, 2001. A1.

²⁷ "Poca vigilancia." *El Diario*. Nov. 8, 2001. A2.

soldiers and Federal Preventive Police, which she reasons would've made it difficult for someone to drop off the bodies without getting caught. She says, "They might've done it because they would be here until sunrise, and nobody knows what they were doing."²⁸

The only other people who frequent the field are the laborers who trudge across it at the crack of dawn, making their way to nearby construction sites. The reporter asks one of them, a man named José Lucio Herrera Meneses, if he ever saw anything. The man tells him couples often use the lot to park their cars and have sex. "Especially on weekends. We would see them from the top floor of the houses that we were building, and when we were downstairs, we could hear their cars arrive."²⁹ He recalls a brown Chevy Blazer he saw several times, as recently as last month. The vehicle was still there the following morning. Herrera says he was going to urinate – the workers' portable bathrooms are perpetually full – but he spotted the Blazer and went to a different place where nobody could see him.

In Mexico City that day, members of all three political parties discuss the state of murdered women in Ciudad Juárez – by now they are widely known as "*Las Muertas de Juárez*," or, like the title of a cheap horror film, "The Dead Women of Juárez." Everyone agrees the state of Chihuahua's investigations have led nowhere. People across the world are talking about the murders; international

²⁸ Torres, Pedro. "Vieron a policías y soldados en la zona." *El Diario*. Nov. 9, 2001. A6.

²⁹ Ibid.

human rights groups and courts have gotten involved, and family members of some of the victims have organized to press for their rights. Unanimously, the members of Congress decide it's time for them to step in. They sign a document that creates a federal commission whose purpose will be to monitor the problem and deliver regular reports to them.³⁰ One of the commission's responsibilities will be to visit Chihuahua and demand accountability from the attorney general and the governor, who have previously avoided phone calls from the capital.³¹ The responsibility of states to the federal government is always a messy power play, and more so now that Chihuahua is controlled by the PRI and the presidency belongs to the National Action Party, or the PAN.

But in Chihuahua, the attorney general already faces heat. More and more people are calling on him to go. As if the eight bodies weren't a big enough problem, it's reported that six inmates in the state's high-security prison recently used the sheets on their beds and some watering hoses to escape. Civic groups are declaring González Rascón useless and demanding his resignation.³² Very much in his style, González responds through the press. His people organize a tight schedule of media appearances, so that even as residents protest outside the walls of a Juárez radio station, the attorney general sits inside speaking promises into a

³⁰ Cháirez Daniel, Jorge. "Llevan casos al Congreso de la Unión." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 9, 2001. A3. Coria Rivas, Carlos. "Comisión especial de diputados federales." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A4.

³¹ Cháirez Daniel, Jorge. "Llevan casos al Congreso de la Unión." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 9, 2001. A3.

³² Barrientos Márquez, Heriberto. "Necesario, reforzar vigilancia en frontera." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 9, 2001. B19. Guadalupe Rocha, José. "Solidaridad, fuga y asesinatos." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A14.

small microphone. He says he assumes all responsibility and that his investigators are following concrete lines of investigation which he can't discuss publicly. He urges *juarenses* to unite behind the law, and asks the press to collaborate instead of criticizing the government or spreading misinformation that could end up helping the criminals.³³

On the front page of *El Diario* that day, there is a short news report announcing that the Juárez and Chihuahua governments are poised to reward any policeman or group of police who provide information that leads to the arrest of the cotton field killers. The prize is \$200,000 pesos – about \$21,500 dollars. When a reporter asks Fernando Medina Sáenz, a state spokesman, why the reward doesn't apply to the average citizen, he responds, "If a common person has information, it's his obligation to help the police."³⁴

It's been three days since the murders were discovered but still, there's deep confusion over who's accountable. Sadly, this is status quo for Mexican citizens, who view their government as a black box, or an intricate labyrinth of power. The absurdity of the police being rewarded for doing their job gets lost in the absurdity of still not knowing who will come through for these eight girls.

³³ Tiscareño, Clarisa. "Asume González Rascón toda la responsabilidad." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 9, 2001. B18. Villalpando Moreno, Rubén and Miroslava Breach Velducea. "Exigen contratación de expertos para indagar muertes en Juárez." *La Jornada*. Nov. 9, 2001. 32.

³⁴ Castañón Leos, Araly. "Ofrecen \$200 mil a policías." *El Diario*. Nov. 8, 2001. A1.

As word of the murders spreads across Juárez, relatives of girls who've gone missing are beginning to panic. They appear at police headquarters to report their lost daughters, sisters, nieces and friends. There is Elena Arrellano Prieto, a 14-year-old teenager from Chiapas who was never again seen after she left her home last Sunday following a family spat. Her aunt files the report; Elena is tall, thin, with black hair and brown skin – not unlike most of the other girls who've gone missing or been found dead. She is a student at Middle School No. 3858, which is out by Kilometer 20 (twenty kilometers from the international line on the road to Casas Grandes), the same place where several young women's bodies were found in 1995. She wore green pants, black tennis shoes, a black jacket. Her family had not reported her missing because they had hoped she'd return on her own.³⁵ This is not uncommon in Juárez: families cleave all the time; young women run away to taste freedom and independence. But the police exploit this fact to avoid searching for those who are truly missing. It's as if the disappeared, men and women, had asked for their misfortune.

At the state's main offices on Eje Juan Gabriel, a mass of black-clad women bursts through the front doors and shuffles down the hallways to the office where Zulema Bolivar runs the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Investigation of Homicides of Women. Each group member wears a small pink cross pinned over her heart. They have left eight prayer candles outside in front of the pink cross

³⁵ Sosa, Luz Del Carmen. "Dununcian más desapariciones de jovencitas." Nov. 9, 2001. A7.

they put up in March to observe International Women's Day. The ladies belong to an umbrella coalition of women's activists, which they call the Coordination of Nongovernmental Organizations for Women's Rights. On the door to Bolívar's office they post a sign that reads, "*Clausurada por incompetencia*," "closed for incompetence." Bolívar hears the noise and emerges; she invites in a couple of women for a conversation, but the group insists that she speak with all of them because "this is a social problem."³⁶

Along with the protestors is a woman named Estela who says two of her friends vanished four days ago. Both of them are from the town of Cacahoatán in Chiapas, the southernmost state in the country, and were in Juárez working as housekeepers. One day after they left work, they didn't make it to the Plaza de Armas downtown, where they were supposed to have met up with Estela. Estela went looking for them but didn't find them anywhere.³⁷

One of the things the women's group wants to know is how many girls and women are currently reported missing. The Special Prosecutor's Office will not disclose the number, but the activists suspect at least sixteen girls have disappeared who resemble the dead in some way: ages between 15 and 22, medium-brown skin, long hair, slim bodies.³⁸ One of the problems in Chihuahua is police are not obligated to begin looking for missing persons until they have been

³⁶ Torres, Pedro. "Mujeres clausuran fiscalía." *El Diario*. Nov. 9, 2001. A1.

³⁷ Villalpando Moreno, Rubén, and Miroslava Breach Velducea. "Exigen contratación de expertos para indagar muertes en Juárez." *La Jornada*. Nov. 9, 2001. 32.

³⁸ Cano C., Luis Carlos, and Carlos Coria Rivas. "Claman justicia en Cd. Juárez." *El Universal*. Nov. 9, 2001. B10.

lost for 72 hours, in case they should return on their own. The feminists would like for this to change; today, however, they bring a set of more urgent demands regarding the eight bodies in the cotton field. They, too, ask that Attorney General González Rascón resign. They want the governor to stop putting his friends in offices that have to do with the women's murders. And they request sound, scientific investigations: criminologists, anthropologists, chemists, experts on serial murder. The cotton field victims bring to light the state's broken missing person's system and the fact that there is no grip on the real size of the problem.

Outside, on the city's streets, the crime is beginning to limit the movement of Juárez's young women. A reporter from the *El Paso Times* interviews a 19-year-old girl who lives near the cotton field and asks her what she thinks about the killings. She says, "I grew up in Juárez, and I've seen this go on for some time. Now I worry because I take the bus to work, and sometimes I walk near that place in the dark. My parents have told me to be extra careful. I didn't even know what was going on with all the police cars until my father told me to watch the news. It's scary."³⁹

The bigger problem hovering in the mind of the people of Juárez is how to make some sense of the murders. On one hand is the question of why the murders happened from a criminological standpoint, but on the other is what the people of

³⁹ Washington Valdez, Diana. "Juarenses demand action in slayings." *El Paso Times*. Nov. 9, 2001. A1.

Juárez might do for themselves and their city. The opinions are many. A sociologist named Graciela de la Rosa says politicians need to stop treating Juárez as their booty, and that the city's political, educational, social and religious institutions need to be made to work. "Unfortunately," she says, "nothing here works – not human rights, and not the procurement of justice." The problem of social decomposition has worsened progressively; she believes that the structures of authority need to change. Personally, she thinks that stopping immigration into the city and the opening of more *maquiladoras* would lower the incidence of violence. "If we analyze the numbers on sexual violence against women, we become horrified, and then understand that the hatred against women on this border is very big."⁴⁰

The governor thinks the problem has to do with alcohol and drugs, and he decides to give some teeth to his zero-tolerance law, which is three years old. He targets bus drivers and bars. People who work in places that sell drinks must remain alcohol-free on the job or risk the business' liquor license. And anytime someone is caught selling drugs or alcohol on a bus, both his license to sell and the driver's driving license will be revoked; both will also have to go to court. The government advertises its new-and-improved policy in the newspaper.⁴¹

Other voices say the violence exists because the city's residents tolerate it. College professor Alfredo Limas Hernández says, "We *juarenses* need to apply

⁴⁰ Salcido, Guadalupe. "'Problema de locura en Juárez': socióloga Graciela de la Rosa." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 9, 2001. A4.

⁴¹ Castañón Leos, Aracely. "Reviven Cero Tolerancia." *El Diario*. Nov. 9, 2001. A6.

zero tolerance to inhumanity. We need to take the reigns and redirect ourselves and take actions that weren't taken in the past 30 years."⁴² Juárez needs a new model of existence, he argues: a new way of relating as a community; a new style of committed government; a reform of the laws meant to preserve the dignity and integrity of human beings. The biggest challenge is defending human life itself. "The cotton field murders are very lamentable because through death and through the pain of these victims' families, we're recognizing that all of us are guilty of the situation."⁴³

But simply tracking down the most recent killers may be a lofty goal. The Canadian criminologist Candace Skrape, who once assisted the Chihuahua government in composing a profile of its presumed serial killers, says, "I'm convinced that what is making the investigations so difficult is that a combination of factors are at work. There is no one explanation for all of the deaths. Some are probably attributable to individuals and some to small groups of men. A prominent feature in Juárez is the drug-trafficking, which, having its own subculture, has thrown a wrench into things."⁴⁴

Skrape's commentary gets lost in the shuffle of opinions. Her theory is not one that works for the government or the private sector or the activists, all of whom want one answer to the murders. But if one sits down and mines the

⁴² Salcido, Guadalupe. "'Cero tolerancia a la inhumanidad.'" *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 9, 2001. A4.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Washington Valdez, Diana. "Juarenses demand action in slayings." *El Paso Times*. Nov. 9, 2001. A1.

newspapers of the day, it becomes evident that the cotton field bodies are a symptom of something much larger, and perhaps darker. The answer is complicated – but in it lie the keys to the city’s abounding troubles.

Day 4: November 9, 2001

The attorney general makes an announcement the next morning. He believes the person who killed the five girls found on Wednesday is not the same person who murdered the first three. The second group had been dead much longer than the first, he says, their bodies carefully buried under construction debris in the drainage canal. Some of those victims also had had their hair cut off near the nape of their neck. He says, “We’re led to think that the canal, because of its odors, served as a place to dump the bodies.” The government is pushing various lines of investigation. There’s the Egyptian they’re sniffing around, even though he’s imprisoned, or perhaps it was the work of gangs or other people involved in organized crime who killed the girls as a way to provoke social chaos. Maybe it was the work of copycats, or a new serial killer. The only theory the attorney general rules out is organ trafficking – the rumor has been swirling throughout Juárez for days.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Rodríguez, Armando. “Es otro asesino en serie.” *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A1. Cano C., Luis Carlos. “Abren 5 líneas de investigación por crímenes.” *El Universal*. Nov. 10, 2001. B8. Villalpando Moreno, Rubén, and Miroslava Breach Velducea. “Colaborará personal de PGR en las pesquisas en Juárez.” *La Jornada*. Nov. 10, 2001. 23.

The investigation could take three to six months, he says; tracking down a serial killer is hard work. First the Chihuahua government has to compile a profile of the killer using sophisticated psychological and computer models, like the FBI. Simply studying the crime scene could take a week. There are hundreds of tons of debris to remove from the drainage canal where the bodies were found Wednesday, and loads of dirt to sift for evidence. The federal government has already sent three forensic experts and one prosecutor to help with the task. Also, the much talked-about “mixed police cells,” made up of cops from local, state, and federal government, have been reassigned from hunting down *picaderos* – as Juárez calls the hundreds of homes and construction sites where one can go for drugs – to protecting women, and they have been asked to advise education centers and workplaces on what to do to keep their females safe. As González Rascón speaks to the press, the Juárez police chief and the federal government’s ambassador in Chihuahua stand on either side of him in solidarity.⁴⁶

But some people aren’t sure the police is even doing its job right. The women’s groups are worried that the heavy machines being used to move around chunks of concrete threaten to disturb the crime scene. The president of the PAN voices his concern that the reward for tips, which has doubled to \$400,000 pesos and now applies to common citizens as well, is only going to inspire the cops to

⁴⁶ Rodríguez, Armando. “Es otro asesino en serie.” *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A1. Ramos, Roberto. “Harán trabajo coordinado.” *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A1. Cano C., Luis Carlos. “Abren 5 líneas de investigación por crímenes.” *El Universal*. Nov. 10, 2001. B8. Villalpando Moreno, Rubén, and Miroslava Breach Velducea. “Colaborará personal de PGR en las pesquisas en Juárez.” *La Jornada*. Nov. 10, 2001. 23.

name a scapegoat so they can claim the prize. Already residents have spotted police cars making rounds in the city's marginal neighborhoods. Even the Union of Junkyard Dealers of Ciudad Juárez makes its voice heard: resign, resign, resign.⁴⁷

As fear spreads, there are reports throughout the city of mysterious characters who are trying to snatch young women. Public Ministry Director Suly Ponce tells reporters that three young women and a 12-year-old girl suffered attempted kidnappings today alone. The 12-year-old girl was on her way to school at about 7 a.m. in the Horizontes del Sur neighborhood when a gray-colored truck pulled up to her side. The girl always walked alone to school because both of her parents have jobs, and every day she made her way across a lot that's dotted with empty homes. Of the three other women who had similar experiences today, two are *maquiladora* employees. Ponce does not reveal their names or which part of town they were in when the attacks happened. She does disclose that they arrived at the government's offices in shock and were sent to the Special Unit for Sexual and Domestic Crimes so they could talk to a psychologist. A worker from that unit tells *El Diario* that reports of attempted abductions and disappearances go up every time a serial murder is discovered. She believes it's the product of a

⁴⁷ Cruz R., Juan Manuel. "Temen haya un 'chivo' expiatorio." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A6. González, Félix A. "Removerán toneladas de tierra en busca de víctimas." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 10, 2001. B1. Salcido, Guadalupe. "Destruyen evidencias, acusan." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 10, 2001. A5.

collective psychosis.⁴⁸ She doesn't say anything about the danger that young women face daily as they move alone across the city, a porous urban space where empty lots and the prevalence of gangs are two key factors related to the women's disappearances.

The state director of transportation says that, beginning next week, every transit driver will have to display a letter-size card showing his name, photo, home address, and driver's license number. The new law applies to some 6,000 public, private, and school bus drivers as well as all taxi cabs. In addition, bus drivers caught speeding or involved in car accidents could be subjected to random drug testing by city police.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the Transportation Department doesn't regulate gray-colored trucks that pull up to middle school students at the crack of dawn.

The director of tourism, a woman named Aracelia Reveles Gómez, has something else on her mind. She says the assassination of women is no reason for people to stop visiting Ciudad Juárez. By that she implies that Juárez's tourists fall on the opposite end of the social spectrum from the murder victims: they are mostly men who move in the world of business. They hold their conferences in Juárez because the Tourism Secretariat advertises the wonderful service infrastructure (nobody mentions that the city's workers have no electricity or no running water in their homes). There are fine Mexican dinners to have in the city's

⁴⁸ Rodríguez, Armando, and Guadalupe Félix Rodríguez. "Frustran secuestro de 4 mujeres." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A6.

⁴⁹ Castañón Leos, Araly. "Más vigilancia en ruterías." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A7.

Pronaf area, a beautified commercial zone near one of the international bridges.

There are tours of the city's charming historical buildings downtown and of its modern and sprawling industrial parks. So attractive is this side of Juárez that the previous month, half of the city's hotels were occupied – a better showing than the southern resort beaches of Cancún. In regards to the murder of women, Reveles Gómez says, "These killings are definitely a serious issue for all of the city's sectors. However, what we want to focus on and emphasize is that we'll continue our aggressive promotional programs. These incidents surpass the levels of security that affect tourists, so we'll keep working on promoting the city."⁵⁰

A scuffle breaks out at the Governor's Palace in the state capital. An alliance of women's rights organizations attempts to make its way into the Central Patio in Chihuahua City to deliver a pronouncement to the governor in protest of the more than 240 women murdered in Juárez. Feminism has strong roots and a storied history in Chihuahua; the women here are determined, articulate, well-organized and quick to act. The governor's security team insists that they sign in individually and comply with all security measures. Before long, there are legs kicking and hands flailing and several people, including a local radio reporter, end up hurt.

Their document reads:

⁵⁰ Castañón Leos, Aracely. "No afecta al turismo." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A7.

"Our network has studied these homicides, and we are convinced, as evidenced by the macabre finding of eight bodies of young women who were raped, mutilated and tortured, that the government entities in charge of resolving the murders have not drafted the proper laws so that there will be not one more dead woman in Ciudad Juárez.

As advocates of the human rights of women, we demand that the murder of women in Juárez be stopped immediately and definitively, and that the government prosecute those who are guilty of the killings as well as the authorities who have committed crimes of omission.

*The number of victims continues to rise and the crimes are neither resolved nor prevented. This constitutes a new kind of gendered violence, one inflicted by the authorities who, by not enacting efficient policies, violate the human rights of women, such as the rights to liberty, security, and life."*⁵¹

These women's activists, along with their allies in Juárez, are responsible for introducing gender to the problem of violence: they insist that the murder of women needs to be understood differently from the murder of men because of their disempowered status in all realms of life. They find the governor's men to be intolerant, arrogant, insensitive. They think it's ironic that they responded with violence to a manifestation against violence. Once the brawl subsides and they make their way to the patio, they do their own style of public protest: they play funeral marches on a stereo and form a cross of red carnations on the floor. They form a circle around it and observe a moment of silence. The location of the event

⁵¹ Hernández Jáuregui, Hugo. "Recuerdan a jóvenes asesinadas en CJ." *El Herald de Chihuahua*. Nov. 10, 2001. B8. Coria Rivas, Carlos. "Intentan impedir protesta de ONG's." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A4. Villalpando Moreno, Rubén, and Miroslava Breach Velducea. "Colaborará personal de PGR en las pesquisas en Juárez." *La Jornada*. Nov. 10, 2001. 23.

is crucial; by bringing their case to the governor's palace, they hope to make clear that the problem of murdered women in Juárez is really a State problem.

Coincidentally, across town students at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua are hosting a conference on feminism. The message of the gathering is that the Mexican woman continues to be, as one student puts it, a queen without a crown. A professor named Isela de Pablo Porras lectures on how man has dominated nature and woman historically and culturally. She says, "In Western culture, to be a man is to be rational, and to be a woman is to be emotional. Men think rationality is more important than sentimentality, because, since sentiments are not considered important, what someone feels is not considered valid, and men think we can only guide our lives through reason."⁵²

Another presenter points out the existing gap between feminist discourse and the lack of policies and programs to achieve gender equality. Throughout Mexico only six women have ever been secretaries of state and three have been governors. Nationally, just 13 percent of Congress and 23 percent of the Supreme Court consist of women.⁵³

Indeed, the status of women in Chihuahua is mired with contradictions. The state has one of the strongest feminist legacies in the country, and still, the men

⁵² Serrano Álvarez, Jesús Manuel. "Exponen conferencia sobre feminismo." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 10, 2001. B16.

⁵³ Serrano Álvarez, Jesús Manuel. "Rezago de mujer chihuahuense en ámbitos político y social." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 10, 2001. B16.

hold on to their power at all costs and refuse to see sexual murder as a full-blown gender crisis.

Day 5: November 10, 2001

It's been five days since the girls' bodies were found, but there is no sign that the government knows where it's heading. The whole ordeal becomes more confusing daily as the theories become increasingly scattered and obtuse. Every stakeholder wants the killings to mean something different, yet their true meaning remains out of grasp.

This morning the local newspapers dramatize the latest theory: From the front page of *El Diario*, the city learns that a new serial killer is on the loose.

*Another Serial Killer . . . His Trademark: He Cut Off the Hair of Five Victims . . . Based on the most recent evidence available, police investigators have discovered that a new serial killer victimized at least five of the eight women whose bodies were found this week . . . According to state police reports, the five bodies found in a drainage canal on Wednesday were lined up about 4 or 5 meters apart, their heads pointed north and their hands were extended in the same direction . . . It was also established that all five had had their hair cut at the base of their head, apparently with a knife, a characteristic unprecedented in other killings.*⁵⁴

It is impossible to judge the accuracy of the article, since every account offers a different version of reality. *El Diario* is the only newspaper that states that the five bodies found Wednesday were in the same position. *El Norte*, the competition, publishes an even more gripping claim on its front cover.

⁵⁴ Rodríguez, Armando. "Es otro asesino en serie." *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. A1.

Crimes Are Connected to SATANISM . . . A Nightmare Without End . . .
Juan Rios, the coordinator of the Catholic Ministry for Religious Studies, says it's possible that a powerful group is carrying out the sacrifice of women to record videos for sale, something that would be related to Satanism . . . The Ministry's coordinator offered a reading of the signs previously found in crime sites that are similar to the ones found this week . . . According to his interpretation, the signs could be related to satanic rituals and the production of "snuff" videos (films in which women are sacrificed in real or fictitious ways), for which they select poor, innocent women . . . His analysis is based on an equilateral triangle that was found last year in the Cerro Bola, just a few meters from where Amparo Guzmán Caixba's body was found, on a board that showed drawings of unclothed women, soldiers, and hooded men . . . According to this reading, the killers could be a group of people with enough power to avoid being arrested.⁵⁵

The triangle refers to an outline that presumably had been made on the ground using 46 rocks, about five meters from where one girl's body was discovered on April 1, 2000, and 500 meters from a body found two months later. The two girls had disappeared 18 days apart, and one of them might've been kept alive for days. Rios' reading of the triangle, which he calls a Triangle of Anarchy, goes like this. It's a triangle used in rituals, signifying that no human or divine law is capable of controlling the individuals behind it. The number "40" is symbolic in the Scriptures; "6" stands for imperfection and for the demonic. For forty days, the persons behind the triangle carried out delirious and evil acts to be in Satan's company.⁵⁶

The story behind the wooden board is equally bizarre. When a young woman named María Guadalupe del Río Vázquez disappeared in 1996, her family and members of the Church of San Marcos organized search groups and scoured

⁵⁵ Pérez, Rosa Isela. "Relacionan crímenes con satanismo." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 10, 2001. A3.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the sandy hills known as Lomas de Poleo for signs of the missing girl. As they did, a group of them came upon a wooden cabin. Inside it they found black wax, women's clothing, and blood stains on the floor. Outside of the cabin were votive candles in black and red, and a pile of wood slats; among them was this wooden board – two meters long by one and a half meters wide – with mysterious designs drawn on it.

One side had a scorpion in the center. Throughout the board there were depictions of long-haired women in the nude, some of them on the ground with their legs flexed. There were five or six soldiers standing behind what seemed like marijuana, some masked men, and a figure in a trench coat and hat. Ríos reads this: The soldiers represent the Mexican Army's complicity with the group that performs human sacrifices and deals drugs. They stand at attention because they work for the men who wear the masks; these are the ones who murder. The man in the trench coat is the godfather; he secures the drugs and women, and need not hide his face because he's protected by those with power. The scorpion stands for the Juárez cartel.⁵⁷

It is a shocking proposition, but these days, anything seems possible. The state's investigators quickly discounted the suggestion that drug traffickers are involved. They took the board away and never again discussed its discovery. To this day, it's impossible to verify what was on the board – or if it even existed.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

That morning brings rain, so all of the digging and sifting at the cotton field comes to a halt. The attorney general says he'll stay in Juárez as long as he has to, and he urges the city's residents to stay calm and not heed the different voices in the community that have generated a state of psychosis. But it seems he's losing patience with his team's investigations. The newspapers say he's given them until Monday to find the killers.⁵⁸

El Heraldo reports that the state is investigating four suspects, possibly copycats. The four were arrested when police stopped them driving with an undressed woman in the back seat. They had given her sleeping pills, and when she awoke she told the authorities the men had said they were going to "throw her away."

The activists and members of law enforcement are unhappy with the way González Rascón is handling the case. Some officials say it was a mistake to have divulged details about how the bodies were found, as the information could inspire other killers and bungle the investigation. They question how he can justify using excavators to claw the earth when the machines could destroy precious clues. The feminists demand professionalism in the collection of evidence and ask the attorney general not to jump to premature conclusions. "They need to not anticipate the facts and keep investigating, so they won't contradict themselves," says Victoria Caraveo Vallina, the leader of a group called Women for Juárez.

⁵⁸ Serrano Álvarez, Jesús Manuel. "Investigan a 4 sospechosos de asesinatos de mujeres." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 11, 2001. B1. Olivas, Juan de Dios. "Reprueban técnicas de búsqueda." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 11, 2001. A5.

“Because one day they say they’ve discovered a new mode of killing, and the next day they say they’re going to keep investigating Abdel Latif Sharif.”⁵⁹

That morning, a *maquiladora* employee is on her way to work when a Thunderbird pulls up beside her and the driver tries to force her into the car. When she resists, he beats her hard. She arrives at the factory shaken, the signs of violence all over her body. The office social worker phones the police. It is the fifth time in two days that a woman reports an attempted rape. The Thunderbird vanishes.⁶⁰

The women’s groups continue their organizing in full force. Thirteen NGO’s with ties to the Catholic Church have signed a letter to members of Congress in which they deem the murders a “national emergency.” It reads, “As a civil society, we refuse to accept the conditions of public insecurity that prevail in our city.” The groups request a Plan of Action Against Violence, a prevention program, and a detailed accounting of the status of the investigations of each murdered woman.⁶¹ Casa Amiga is offering free counseling to any woman who’s suffering from panic due to the week’s events.⁶² And the group Women for Juárez is organizing a work stoppage. The organizers want *maquiladora* employees to

⁵⁹ Ramos, Roberto. “Identifican a cinco.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A1. Minjares, Gabriela. “Cuestionan revelación hecha por procurador.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A7.

⁶⁰ Sosa, Luz del Carmen. “Se salva otra mujer de un secuestro.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A6.

⁶¹ Torres, Pedro. “Claman emergencia social.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A6.

⁶² Minjares, Gabriela. “Cuestionan revelación hecha por procurador.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A7. Minjares, Gabriela. “Dan ayuda psicológica a familias de mujeres.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A7.

cease laboring for ten minutes to express their solidarity; ten minutes is as much as the labor code allows them to stop working without losing the day's pay.⁶³

At the Hotel Fiesta Inn in the northern part of the city, dozens of activists from across Mexico and the United States have gathered to discuss the rights of women at an event called the International Forum of Women Workers Against Violence. They'd initially come to discuss the inequality of wages between the sexes and the need for women to organize collectively to protest child labor and pregnancy tests forced on women who seek employment in the *maquiladoras*. Now, the story of 20-year-old Claudia Ivette, the young woman who ended up in the cotton field after she got turned away from work for being two minutes late, speaks louder about the situation of female workers in Juárez. Among the audience, the members of Women for Juárez distribute small pins made of pink felt and a black cross. It is the emblem of Voices Without Echo, a group organized by the family of María Sagrario González, a seventeen-year-old murdered in April of 1998. Meanwhile on the stage, Linda Chavez Thompson, the executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, says the women should form international alliances among labor unions and demand that the transnational companies in Juárez respect human rights.

Another guest speaker is Patricia Aguirre de Martínez, the governor's wife. She is here as the president of the state's Family Welfare System. She tells the audience, "Gendered violence, as it's called today, embarrasses the victim and

⁶³ Minjárez, Gabriela. "Llaman a realizar acciones civiles." *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A6.

allows the situation to repeat itself. It's something the victim hides for fear of being judged." A politician's wife, she is proper in her speech and highly manicured. There's no hint of how, four years later, one of her relatives will tell me that the woman ended up on a hospital bed after her husband, the governor, beat her. For women of all social classes, the violence of day-to-day living remains silenced.

So what is really at the bottom of the violence in Juárez? Is it a psychological problem? A social one? Is violence political? Maybe the detonator is poverty. According to *El Diario*, only 20 percent of the city's *maquiladoras* pay to have their employees transported home; the rest drop them off downtown or at the entrance to their *colonias*, their neighborhoods; from there they walk home in the dark hours of early morning, many of them alone. There are dangers that pile up at home when single mothers work: Juárez has 94,000 children between the ages of zero and four, but only enough space in daycares for 5,400 of them. City planning is also a problem. Local historian Raúl Flores Simental faults the reductive view of the planners who laid out Juárez: "Throughout the four cardinal points they planted *maquiladoras* and stores, but they forgot that a city is more than that." The fragile economy has made things worse. More than 60,000 *maquiladora* workers have lost their jobs in the past weeks, and one of the newspapers reports that the city council has rejected a proposal to build 4,000 homes because, in the words of one of the council's members, "the city is not

responsible for building houses.”⁶⁴ These are the precarious living conditions that serve as a backdrop to the murders.

Because the news stories about the cotton field are crowding the front pages, a story about a dirty state police commander gets bumped to page 13, section B. According to the report, a man named Enrique Mendoza García, who was coordinator of the Special Projects Team of the Chihuahua State Police, was riding in a police car with four other men when members of the Federal Preventive Police searched the vehicle at an inspection point and found 18 packets of marijuana wrapped in adhesive tape.⁶⁵

This adds yet another layer of context to the violence in Juárez. The commander’s arrest provokes confusion and discord between the state’s political parties because it seems to say so much about Juárez: It’s a sign of the degradation of the groups charged with keeping people safe, it explains why people don’t trust the police, and it reflects how far the tentacles of the drug trade have reached inside all levels of government. It also means that the so-called mixed police cells, which had been heralded as a united front against crime by all three levels of government, may need to be dissolved in order to gain better control within each

⁶⁴ Sosa, Luz del Carmen. “Se salva otra mujer de un secuestro.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A6. Salcido, Guadalupe. “Hijos sin rezago.” *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 11, 2001. A10. Flores Simental, Raúl. “Una propuesta para resolver los asesinatos.” *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 11, 2001. B5. Chávez Díaz de León, Miguel Angel. “La ciudad del horror.” *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A19. Chaparro S., Arturo. “La solidaridad y los políticos.” *El Herald de Chihuahua*. Nov. 11, 2001. A7.

⁶⁵ Ramos, Roberto. “Envían al penal al comandante y su banda.” *El Diario*. Nov. 10, 2001. B13.

agency. In essence, each police group has to keep watch on the others. The consensus in the day's editorials is that nobody believes the politicians anymore when they talk about justice and the rule of law.

Celia de la Rosa's phone does not stop ringing. Her family, her husband's family, her daughter's friends from the Tecnológico – everyone keeps calling since the newspapers reported that one of the eight bodies in the cotton field belongs to her daughter Guadalupe. The articles say that investigators found the blouse she was wearing the day she disappeared as she was walking to a friend's house over a year ago. It was noontime, and her friend didn't live far from the cotton field. But Celia won't believe her daughter is dead until the authorities call her to come view the body – and even then she says, she'll demand tests to confirm the identity.

In her living room she sits and waits. She is agonized and confused. Sometimes, she believes she'll see Guadalupe walk in through the door. When she leaves her home, she expects to recognize Guadalupe's face on one of the countless young women she crosses paths with on the street. "Right now, I don't feel that it's her," she says. Maybe it's my fear, I don't know. I can say that it's not her, but I don't know if that's because of my own fear or something. I just don't

want to be crying right now for something that's not for sure." She asks the media for more respect and to act responsibly.⁶⁶

A little past midnight in a parking lot of a Burger King on De las Torres Avenue, a man driving a late-model Lincoln Navigator is abducted from his vehicle. The four men who take him at gunpoint quickly flee the scene in a black Grand Cherokee. It's the sixth case of a *levantón*, as kidnappings are known here, in the past sixteen days. What's unclear is whether the perpetrators are paramilitaries working for the drug cartels or policemen acting on behalf of the attorney general. Neither situation is uncommon in Juárez. Just in case it's the government's doing, family members of the disappeared file denunciations asking that their relatives be released or else taken to the courts where justice can be imparted. The prisons in Mexico are filled with inmates who spend years waiting to go before a judge.

Another man who gets picked up is Víctor Javier García Uribe, a bus driver people call "El Cerillo," "The Matchstick." It's impossible to know who's behind his abduction because the people who picked him up were wearing masks. They also wore black jackets with the gold initials of the state police, but that alone doesn't prove they were cops – the paramilitaries seem to have easy access to cop uniforms. And they carried rifles. They burst through the doors of García Uribe's

⁶⁶ Castañón Leos, Aracely. "El tormento de la incertidumbre." *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. A1. Pérez, Rosa Isela. "Niegan que el cuerpo sea el de Lupita." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 11, 2001. A3.

home on Calle Tarahumaras and dragged him out with him resisting. He told them he had an *amparo*, a government injunction that would forbid any cops from picking him up without cause. The men didn't flinch.

García's name appears briefly in the docket of the history of the women's murders. In 1999, when police arrested a group of men referred to as "Los Choferes," The Bus Drivers, one of the group's members, a man named José Manuel Guardado Márquez signaled García as someone else who'd been involved. García had been arrested with no warrant, but the Public Ministry ordered him released when prosecutors found no evidence that linked him to the crimes.

Earlier this week, García had noticed a vehicle with men dressed in black make slow rounds by his home. Some of the men had their faces covered. It made him believe they intended to pick him up, so he went to the police station and asked for another injunction. Again, the paper proved useless. "We're going to kill you," the men said, and he knew they meant it. In the pages of *Norte*, an editorialist wonders if the attorney general is out looking for scapegoats again.⁶⁷

Day 6: November 11, 2001

By Sunday, twelve girls ages 13 to 20 years old have been reported missing in the span of four days. Some of them disappeared as long as six months ago. One of them is named María Antonia Medina González; she's 18 years old and a

⁶⁷ Ramos, Roberto. "'Levantán' otros dos hombres." *El Diario*. Nov. 11, 2001. B1.
Olivas, Juan de Dios. "Fabrican a culpables." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 11, 2001. A1.

worker at an RCA-Thompson *maquiladora*. She disappeared in June, but her mother had not reported it because she thought she might've run off with her boyfriend. Another missing girl is named Elena Arellano Prieto. She is sixteen, a middle-school student. Her family had thought she'd moved to another city, but now they are not so sure.⁶⁸ The list goes on, and the line between girls who want a life of their own and girls whose lives have been stolen from them begins to blur.

A group that calls itself Juarenses A.C. drafts a public letter. It reads: "For nine years, among the different problems that face Ciudad Juárez we have seen the lack of worth given to human life and the attacking of women, who are the most noble and important sector of the social fabric of our population." The organization pledges its solidarity with the victims' families and urges the government to wage a war against violence and offer some preventive measures. The letter continues: "It's time that all of us who live in and who love this city – feeling as we do, proudly *juarenses* – take on the daily commitment of doing something to bring about higher security for its residents, who should be able to enjoy tranquility and be guaranteed the highest of standards of living." The dispatch is signed by 35 men, most with one or more titles attached to their name.⁶⁹ They are attorneys and engineers and businessmen. It is a rare instance that the interests of middle-class men and impoverished women have collided.

⁶⁸ Cano C., Luis Carlos. "Anuncian paro laboral de mujeres en Juárez." *El Universal*. Nov. 12, 2001. B13.

⁶⁹ "A la opinion pública." *El Diario*. Nov. 12, 2001. A8.

There are no women among the signatures because civic power among the wealthy is gendered, too.

At about noon, mothers of disappeared women and members of the Border Region Coordinator for Nongovernmental Organizations hold a protest in the Plaza de Armas in the heart of downtown Juárez. The director of the coalition says the problem of violence is not about gender but about justice. He questions why state officials in the previous administration were named to positions of power in the federal government despite their failure to stop the killing of women. "We have a system that is decadent, degraded and corrupt to the core," he says.⁷⁰

The women place candles, a wooden cross and a black bow on the kiosk in front of the cathedral, as well as scraps of paper with their prayers: *Lord, pray for our disappeared men. So that apathy and indifference will not abound in our hearts. For all the residents of our beloved Ciudad Juárez.*

In the midst of the group, disconcerted and confused, stands a woman named Hilda Castañeda Gastelum. Her 13-year-old daughter, Miriam Yolanda, has been missing for nineteen days. She was last seen leaving her home in the Lomas de San José neighborhood early one morning, on her way to Benemérito de las Américas Middle School. She wore her school uniform. That afternoon, she called her mother to tell her that she'd left with friends, but "she was crying," her mother

⁷⁰ Castañón Leos, Araly. "Protestan contra la impunidad." *El Diario*. Nov. 12, 2001. A9. González, Mayra Selene. "Protestan madres de desaparecidas." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 12, 2001. B13. Cano C., Luis Carlos. "Anuncian paro laboral de mujeres en Juárez." *El Universal*. Nov. 12, 2001. B13.

says. "She was going to tell me something, but the call got cut." When she reported her missing daughter to police, they told her that they couldn't classify the case as a disappearance because of the phone call. When the cotton field bodies were discovered this week, the mother received a phone call from the authorities asking her for information about Miriam. Everything else she knows about the cotton field is what she's seen in the news. She continues to wait for an answer.

That evening, the attorney general calls a press conference at the state government's offices to announce that the killers have been found.

As the cameras flash and roll and reporters point their tape recorders toward his face, González Rascón tells Juárez that the assassins are now safely behind bars. They've been charged as suspects in the rape and murder of eleven young women and are now presumed guilty unless a judge decides otherwise. They are two men in their late twenties, bus drivers both of them. One of them is 29-year-old Víctor Javier García Uribe, "The Matchstick." The other is his 28-year-old co-worker, Gustavo González Meza, who's known as "The Seal." He The attorney general says the men have confessed to the killings and have even stated each of their victims' names. They are responsible for the eight cotton field murders, and Gustavo González has also confessed to killing three other girls, including the two who were found by the supposed diabolic triangle. The men have said they'd get high on alcohol and marijuana and cocaine, then drive the city's streets in a beat-

up cream-colored van searching for a woman they believed they could force onto their vehicle. Once they had a girl inside, the one who wasn't driving would beat her until she was semiconscious and rape her. Afterwards, the men would switch roles. Then they would take the girls to the cotton field and end their lives with a baseball bat. "They took a lot of pleasure from killing them and raping them," González says.

The arrested men presumably belong to the gang of bus drivers who killed seven women in 1998. González says they're connected to the gang's leader, Jesús Manuel Guardado, who remains in prison for the crimes. Victor García had of course passed through the prison's gates himself when the government investigated the bus drivers' murders. González says there's also a witness who has testified that she twice saw García by the field, where he was unloading a bulk that could've been a body. Those two details – García's stint in prison and the unnamed witness – coupled with the men's confessions, make the government's case. González says the men have shared details "that only the persons who committed the crimes could know."⁷¹

The arrests were carried out under the orders of José Manuel Ortega Aceves, head of the northern zone of the attorney general's office, and by two

⁷¹ Rodríguez, Armando. "Culpan a 2 choferes." *El Diario*. Nov. 12, 2001. A1. Luján, Francisco and Juan de Dios Olivas. "Caen 2 sospechosos." *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Nov. 12, 2001. A1. Martínez Coronado, Benjamín. "Caen asesinos de mujeres." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 12, 2001. B1. Villalpando, Moreno. "Detienen a presuntos asesinos de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez." *La Jornada*. Nov. 12, 2001. 29. Silva, Mario Héctor. "Caen presuntos asesinos de mujeres." *El Financiero*. Nov. 12, 2001. 82.

commanders of the state police named Alejandro Castro Valles and Apolinar Juárez Castro. The members of the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Investigation of Homicides of Women had nothing to do with them. The attorney general says the breakthrough represents the collaboration of all levels of government.⁷² He also warns Juárez's citizens not to take the development for granted. He says, "We have to keep working so that we don't face a similar event, or have someone commit other rapes and murders. But in this particular situation of young girls who were massacred, the case is completely resolved."⁷³

Once the press conference has finished, González tries to leave the building through the front doors but runs into an angry mob of people that includes Victor García's wife, relatives and friends. "Where's my husband?" the woman, named Miriam, demands to know. Startled by the ambush, the bureaucrat slips into a nearby room and slams the door. "Where do you have him?" she yells. "Show your face! What you're doing is an injustice. God forgive you!"

Miriam García Lara tells reporters a similar story to what appeared in the newspapers a few days earlier. She and her husband had noticed that some armed men in a gold Suburban were circling their home. The family had lived in fear since police had picked up Victor when José Guardado told them García knew a thing or two about the loose ways of Nancy, a teenage girl Guardado had raped and left for dead. Miriam García said she began to ride with her husband as he

⁷² Martínez Coronado, Benjamín. "Caen asesinos de mujeres." *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*. Nov. 12, 2001. B1.

⁷³ Ibid.

drove his route on the bus they had bought with savings. The men who took her husband this week wore Halloween masks. "They came in by force," she says. "All of them had weapons, and they dragged him out of the house. They would tell him that they were going to kill him. He told them that he had an injunction, but they told him they were going to shove it up his ass."

The wife of the second bus driver under arrest, Blanca Guadalupe López Avalos, is eight months pregnant. She says she and her husband were in their home on Presa Valsequillo Street when five state policemen showed up at about 2:30 a.m. on Saturday and told him he was under arrest for stealing the bus he drove for a living, which belonged to the Federal Commission of Electricity. "My husband told them that wasn't true," she says, "that the bus was exactly where it was supposed to be, and that he wasn't going anywhere with them. The agents told him that they knew he had some weapons, and they loaded theirs. So then my husband agreed to go with them, because aside from me – I'm about to give birth – we had our three children with us, who are six, three, and two."

Some twenty minutes pass before the attorney general manages to leave the room where he shut himself. This time, he scurries out the back door flanked by ten police agents.

Ironically, this is where the story begins, not where it ends. Less is known about the murders now that there are people behind bars. There are more questions to answer, including how the government found its killers and how a killer could

know – much less remember – the first and last names of young women he presumably yanked off the street. The effect of the government's arrest is that it blocks the average citizen from the truth. The quest for knowledge ends here.

For the time being, the names that the attorney general gives to the press will stand in the public record as the eight cotton field victims. They are Guadalupe Luna de la Rosa, Verónica Martínez Hernández, Bárbara Araceli Martínez Ramos, Mayra Juliana Reyes Solís, Laura Berenice Ramos Monárrez, Claudia Ivette González Banda, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, and María de los Angeles Acosta.⁷⁴ Someone in the government leaks details about the condition of the bodies to *El Diario*, and for now, these tidbits of information are how Ciudad Juárez knows its fallen girls:

Victim No. 1: She was between 15 and 16 years old and 1.62 meters tall. She wore a striped blouse in shades of pink, red, maroon, and white. White brassiere and white socks. Officials are trying to determine if this victim is Esmeralda Herrera Monreal.

Victim No. 2: She was 1.63 meters tall. She wore a beige brassiere, size medium, and a white elastic resembling a girdle. She had a black ponytail-holder on her head. The government is confident this is Claudia Ivette González Banda.

Victim No. 3: She was perhaps 19, maybe 20 years old and 1.67 meters tall. She wore a sleeveless, either white or beige blouse (time and all that dirt make

⁷⁴ Rodríguez, Armando. "Culpan a 2 choferes." *El Diario*. Nov. 12, 2001. A1.

it impossible to tell), and a black brassiere with no under-wire, size 36. Officials believe this is Laura Berenice Ramos Monárrez.

Victim No. 4: She was perhaps the youngest of the group, about 13 years old and 1.52 meters tall. She wore a blouse with straps and circles of green and yellow, size large. A white brassiere in small. Nobody has claimed her body, but if what the attorney general has announced is correct, she could be Verónica Martínez, Bárbara Araceli Martínez, or María de los Angeles Acosta.

Victim No. 5: She was between 19 and 22 years old, and between 1.55 and 1.59 meters tall. She had no flesh on her bones, only hair. She wore a blouse with buttons that went down the back and a black brassiere in size small. Also, a black headband, black beaded necklace, black bracelet, and a braided elastic around her ankle. Authorities say this is Guadalupe Luna de la Rosa.

Victim No. 6: She was 15 to 17 years old, and around 1.54 to 1.56 meters tall. She wore her long hair in a braid. She had on a navy-blue tee-shirt with the word "Guess" printed across the top, and a black brassiere with no under-wire and transparent plastic straps. The government suspects this is Mayra Juliana Reyes Solís.

Victim No. 7: She was between 13 and 15 years old and 1.55 to 1.58 meters tall. She had trimmed her fingernails short and neat. She wore a lime-green blouse with tiny black details simulating snake skin, which tied in the back. Her bra, size small, was black and had a bow on the front. Because nobody has

claimed her body, she, too, could be Verónica, Barbara Aracely, or María de los Angeles.

Victim No. 8: She was 16 or 17 years old and approximately 1.58 meters tall, with brown hair. She wore a white blouse with blue designs, a black brassiere in size 30-32, size five jeans, black panties, white sports socks, and blue-and-white tennis shoes in size two. She also had a bracelet with white beaded flowers and blue details, and she had polished her nails in gold lacquer. She, too, remains unidentified, unclaimed. Anonymous.

The government doesn't even pretend to care about the stories behind each of the victims. It prefers to keep them as bodies, because bodies don't talk – or do they? When I arrived in Juárez two years later, the cotton field continued to whisper its truths, and in my dreams, the bodies screamed. They want to say something, but what? Moving throughout the city for more than a year, wondering, researching, asking, only shed some light on their message. Then I landed in the simple kitchen of a woman named Irma Monreal, the mother of Victim No. 1, the girl found by José Luis Ayala Ramírez, or José Aguilar Ramírez – Esmeralda Herrera Monreal. And I began to see the whole picture.

Part 3:

Fear and Survival

Casa Amiga

While have the *feminicidios* monopolized the attention of journalists, activists and artists, a quieter form of suffering persists among women in Juárez. Hardly anybody wants to contemplate the dimensions or the effects of domestic violence. It is considered not “sexy” enough, not urgent enough, not shocking enough. Domestic violence makes it more difficult to argue that the treatment of females in Juárez is particularly acute, and that the city requires special attention and intervention. Domestic violence does not feel like an emergency. And the law is more murky on whether and when domestic violence becomes a crime.

In the late 1990s, Brian Barger, a CNN reporter, visits Juárez to produce a report about the women’s murders. But he is equally moved by the cases of violence the headlines miss. “Why don’t you do something for the women who survive violence?” Barger asks Ester Chávez Cano, a feisty feminist who publishes newspaper columns denouncing gender problems in Chihuahua and who was been recording each of the murders since 1993 through her work with the group 8 de Marzo, an organization founded by a loose coalition of feminists.

On February 3, 1999, Casa Amiga opens its doors in a modest former home on a street called Perú Norte in downtown Juárez. In a city of more than a million people, it’s the first rape crisis and domestic violence center ever to exist. Throughout the world, this type of violence is suffered quietly, and this is particularly true in Mexico, where state governments have been disturbingly slow in legislating the issue and where home life is considered sacred and private. Still,

the women come. By its second year, Casa Amiga's tiny staff handles an average of 73 cases per month. By 2001, they are treating an astounding 197 cases per month.⁷⁵ They range from cases of physical and emotional aggression to sexual abuse and incest. The staff responds with psychological therapy, legal advice, and referrals for social services. By 2002, it has also created a number of workshops and support groups that reveal a much wider range of needs: "Understanding Your Emotions," "Surviving Domestic Violence," "Weaving With Our Voices" (for survivors of sexual abuse), "Elevating my Self-Esteem," "School for Fathers and Mothers" (to prevent child abuse), "Children's Art Workshop" (for young survivors of violence), "Nonviolent Solutions to Conflicts," "Controlling Aggression," and "Personal Defense." By the time I visited the center in 2004, another workshop had been added denominated "The Last Opportunity," for women who were considering leaving their husbands and those who were already in the process of divorce.

It's probably fair to say that on a national scale, the widespread problem of domestic violence went largely unrecognized until activism around the women's murders in Juárez forced the question of gender into public awareness and debate. The first comprehensive study of domestic violence in the country was not carried out until 2003. Through that investigators found that one in five Mexican women

⁷⁵ Casework totals in Casa Amiga reports provided to me by Ester Chávez Cano for the years 2000-2002.

experienced some type of violence in the home.⁷⁶ Of those, 42 percent also reported having being abused as children. Those numbers likely fall far short of reality. In her own study of domestic violence in Juárez, political scientist Kathleen Staudt found that anywhere between half and two-thirds of victims “suffered in silence” – meaning they never reported their experiences of violence to either government authorities or to family or friends.⁷⁷ A full 80 percent said they did not trust the police: “The police are feared, neither revered nor sought for assistance with assault.”⁷⁸ Of the women Staudt worked with, 27 percent said they had been hit by their partners and 12 percent had experience rape, most commonly at the hands of strangers. The most touching aspect of the study is the revelation of the extent to which women live in fear and sadness. More than two-thirds of the respondents, to different extents, said they lived fearfully, and when they were asked if sadness affected their daily activities, six of every ten said it did. Shockingly, about one in ten had contemplated suicide in the past year. As part of the workshop, one group of women designed a poster that declared, “*No debemos ser mamás tristes*” – we should not be sad moms. Another wrote “*Encontrarle sentido a la vida*” – we must seek meaning in life.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Olaiz, Gustavo, Aurora del Río, and Martha Híjar, eds. *Violencia contra mujeres: Un reto para la salud pública de México*. Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública de México, 2004.

⁷⁷ Staudt, Kathleen. *Violence and Activism at The Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 72.

⁷⁹ Ibid, pp. 55-56.

Casa Amiga has the feel and energy of a young woman's dorm. The walls are painted in bright, welcoming colors and dressed with posters denouncing violence and announcing events for women. During an orientation session that was in process when I visited in March 2004, laughter constantly emerged from the room. It also feels a bit like a doctor's office, with shelves and cabinets lined with appointment books and case files. Although Ester was usually present, the place operated without her: it was its own machine, almost perfectly efficient. Every woman who came in was dispatched to a psychologist, lawyer, social worker, or social service agency. Anytime Ester walked in, the place felt even more alive. "*Hola mi reina*," she would greet everyone. "Hello my darling."

Chávez Cano is a machine in her own right. A petite, frail-looking woman who has battled cancer for several years now, she is anything but. Once I watched her sit before a group of South Korean businessmen in polo shirts as she explained, without an ounce of concern for political correctness, the complex interrelationship of social and economic problems in Juárez. Outside the conference room, her all-female staff attended one client after another. At the time the center counted five psychologists, two attorneys, one social worker, one doctor, and eight volunteers. They were a team of idealistic, educated young women who each had discovered the problem of gender in the context of her own life or in the environment around them.

In their work with Casa Amiga they had observed the following trends. Between 30 to 40 percent of the women they saw made the decision to undergo

therapy, but the vast majority of them experienced various types of trouble in completing the average treatment plan of three months. They initially sought help at Casa Amiga because they were afraid of losing their self-control and doing something damaging to themselves, their spouse or their children. Their patterns of violence were learned – many had experience violence at home as children. And they brought those patterns with them from their states of origin to Ciudad Juárez. Interestingly, it was not the city that taught them to be violent, as popular thought would have it.

Ester walked me to the reception area and allowed me to read through the reports her case workers wrote up for each new client.⁸⁰ “Do you have an appointment?” the pretty assistant asked a woman who sat patiently in the waiting area, clutching her purse to her chest. Her appointment was not until noon but she had to take a series of buses to get here, forcing her to arrive a whole hour early. It was evident that seeking help requires a huge amount of sacrifice and effort. Some women have even had to lie to their husbands about their whereabouts to avoid retribution.

For several hours each of the next few days, I read case summaries (as well as other archival material) at Casa Amiga. Having had no scholarly background in domestic violence, I hoped that reading these files would help me understand –

⁸⁰ The files are confidential, but Ester wanted to provide me with the best sense possible of the myriad issues that the staff at Casa Amiga attends. At the time, I did not personally know any of Casa Amiga’s clients. She allowed me to read one-paragraph summaries of each file so long as I did not use names. I respected the confidentiality of the rest of the file.

that they would provide a glimpse of its dynamics, perhaps even help me detect patterns. I was interested particularly in whether a close-up view of domestic violence as lived experience could help me view the murder of women through a new lens. As I discovered, opening up the folders was like scratching at a deep social wound. Each new case complicated my vision of the problem. The following is a sampling of what I read; I offer many examples because I think they largely speak for themselves and for the overwhelmingly complex problem of domestic violence.

30-year-old woman: "She wants to divorce her husband. He is an alcoholic and he becomes very aggressive towards her. He insults her. He has hit her and her eldest daughter. She feels desperation."

Her 14-year daughter: "She says her parents' problems affect her. They are violent with each other and her mother has heart disease. She feels like nobody pays any attention to her. She feels very nervous. She has a 34-year-old boyfriend. Her mother knows about this."

Her 13-year-old daughter: "Her parents fight all the time. Her mother hits her father. She feels very sad. She has always lived with an aunt and uncle, and her grandmother has also lived with them for two years. She feels like her parents have never worried about her."

21-year-old woman: "When she has problems or arguments with her husband, she becomes very agitated and tends to bang herself against the wall. She is afraid that she will end up hurting her baby because she feels like she can't control herself. Her grandfather touched her inappropriately when she was a child."

35-year-old woman: "Her parents gave her away and her stepfather sexually abused her. Currently when her partner caresses her she recalls the rape."

33-year-old woman: "She came here with her children from Monterrey because her husband mistreated her. He has threatened to come for her. Her younger children want to go back with him."

40-year-old woman: "She lived in free union with someone for eleven years. A month ago she separated from him because he frequently would not come home. She found out that he lives with another woman. She wants assistance in requesting child support from him for her two daughters. He would hit her and would threaten that he was going to disappear her. She is afraid he will hurt their children."

27-year-old woman: "Her husband has been violent toward her. Last Saturday he attempted to kill her. He also threatens in front of his children to commit suicide. He will not allow her to work and he does not work either. He also forces her to have sexual relations with him. He threatens her with death and says he is going to take away their children from her."

30-year-old woman: "For the past week her daughter has behaved as though she feels very insecure. She does not want to be at school and she cries easily. Her mother says she was always been a very independent girl."

34-year-old woman: "Her husband was sexually abused as a child. Her daughter was expelled from school for using drugs. Her youngest daughter has speech problems and is rebellious and aggressive. There is a lot of verbal violence in her home. She has been violent with her eldest daughter."

42-year-old woman: "Yesterday she was physically abused by her ex-husband. He broke into her home violently and tried to take their daughter. She has filed a police report for her injuries. She says she is 'depressed and afraid' about having to experience another violent incident."

44-year-old man: "He says he doesn't trust his wife anymore. He says she dresses provocatively."

17-year-old boy: "He is seeking psychological help because he feels depressed. His mother recently passed away and his father abandoned him. He experienced child abuse and has had a drinking problem since he was ten years old that has grown worse."

47-year-old woman: "Her 15-year-old daughter left her home. She suffers from domestic violence. Her daughter left because she didn't want to witness any more violence."

19-year-old woman: "She came to Juárez to work. She has been with her partner for one year. He would always hit her and force her to have sexual

relations with him. He forced her to do all the work around the home when their baby was newborn. Her father raped her. He has been in prison for nine years. Her daughter has Down Syndrome.”

38-year-old woman: “His wife suffered a lot as a child. She married very young. She suffers from depression and anger attacks. He doesn’t know how to act around her. He doesn’t want to lose her. He believes she is the love of his life.”

24-year-old man: “He is here for help because he suffers from ‘serious’ conjugal problems. He admits that he is ‘aggressive, violent and temperamental.’ He reports constant episodes of physical and emotional violence. He mentions that his wife is ‘jealous, violent and abusive’ with their daughter.”

20-year-old woman: “Her husband hits her. She does not want to leave him. She is going to propose to him that he seek help. She does not want to report him to the police.”

22-year-old woman: “She wants to separate from her husband. He has hit her and once attempted to strangle her. They have been married for four years. She feels very sad, with low self-esteem. He used to humiliate her. She attempted to commit suicide a month ago.”

29-year-old man: “He separated from his wife in December, and this has provoked anxiety attacks. He left her because he is jealous. He has caused scenes because of his jealousy and she left to Oaxaca.”

21-year-old woman: “She was raped by her three brothers beginning when she was six years old. They are 28, 26, and 24 years old. She lives with her parents and her two younger siblings. She hates her three brothers. The abuse lasted until she was eight years old.”

40-year-old woman: “She feels like she is going crazy ever since she woke up one morning believing that she had lost her hearing. Since then, she cries easily and has suicidal thoughts.”

42-year-old woman: “She has arthritis. She has family problems because of their economic situation. Her husband is a good partner and father. She is the one who yells and is poisonous. There is no physical aggression. Their 14-year-old daughter asked them to come.”

22-year-old woman: "Her husband is very jealous with her ever since she began working. He has hit her on two occasions. She is pregnant; he has threatened to kill her. She is confused because he was not like that before. Her mother-in-law is watching their son."

26-year-old woman: "She is pregnant from an extramarital relationship. The father of the child she is carrying wants to take the baby from her. They have lived together. He has been physically violent with her. Her husband used to sexually abuse her oldest daughter."

45-year-old woman: "She is very prone to anger, she gets angry over everything. Her husband is very calm. At times when she has felt exasperated she has hit him. She wants help in improving her character. She has also brought her son because the kids at his school bother him a lot and he does not stick up for himself. They tell him that he is a little girl, they hit him and take his food and money. The boy has always been very introverted."

30-year-old woman: "Her 14-year-old daughter is being harassed. She says the person follows her and has touched her inappropriately."

21-year-old woman: "Fifteen days ago a stranger raped her on her way to work. She suspects of a co-worker who she named on the police report she filed. Since the attack she has felt very insecure and has been aggressive toward her daughters."

29-year-old woman: "She says her sister (Abigail Esmeralda, 16 years old) is disappeared. She disappeared in 1996 or 1997. She says her family filed a report but has received no updates on the case. Her sister worked in a maquiladora on Tomás Fernández Boulevard. She is the youngest sibling."

30-year-old woman: "Her husband is physically aggressive with her. Both of them are violent, they both hit each other. But he has threatened her for a long time. He tells her he is going to kill her, to strangle her and bury her in the patio. Last night he tried to strangle her, but their son woke up. She does not want to go back with him. She wants a divorce. She is afraid. Her mother also suffered from violence. Her father would hit her, and she wouldn't do anything about it. She hated him for that."

50-year-old man: "He is here at Casa Amiga because his wife no longer wants to be with him, since he says he did not value her. He says that he is reacting now that it is too late. He says he grew up without any love. He has lost weight because of the situation. He wants to make a change in his life."

When I had finished reading through the case files, I made a list of the Mexican states reflected in the clients' place of birth: Chihuahua, Veracruz, Mexico D.F., Chiapas, Jalisco, Michoacán, Puebla, Durango, Hidalgo, Estado de México, Nuevo León, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosí, Coahuila. Then, I made a rough list of the different ways in which domestic violence manifests itself: Rape, drug addiction, arguments, physical blows, men who promise they are going to change but don't, girls who feel that nobody worries about them, desperation, nervousness, lack of attention, psychiatric problems, incest, jealousy, suicide attempts, husbands who don't allow their wives to leave home without permission, anxiety, panic, depression, unplanned pregnancies, rebellious children, loss of interest in life, threats, men who cheat, children who resent their parents' separation, loneliness, lack of trust.

Indeed, the people who came to Casa Amiga brought with them histories of violence that had originated in virtually every region in the country, and their stories complicated general notions about how domestic violence plays out. What I personally found most striking was how violent acts have their own complicated genealogies. Violence seems to be patterned and learned, both consciously and subconsciously. It also appears to be more cyclical than linear, making it difficult to assess the degree of risk for a victim at any one point. It is not a problem of clear-cut victims and victimizers, either: Indeed, I was struck by the number of women who claimed that they reacted to violence experienced in childhood or at

the hands of their partners by being aggressive toward their own children. I was also surprised, sometimes touched, by the descriptions of men I read who reported feeling helpless and sad, and who desperately wanted help in breaking the chain of violence. At the end of my lists I wrote: "the signs of a patriarchal society under stress." But in re-reading my notes, it's evident that the problem of domestic violence is about much more than patriarchy or gender ideology. And it's certainly not simply about men who lashed out against women because they came to Juárez, found work in the maquiladoras, and became more independent.

The Black Christ

I had been in Juárez for two months when I heard news of the year's first female murder victim. It was March 10, 2004, a gorgeous spring day that had quickly faded our memories of the frigid winter. Somewhere around 8:15 a.m., a truck operator who worked in a sand and gravel pit had spotted a lump by the side of a road that winds up toward the Cerro del Cristo Negro, the Mountain of the Black Christ. When he walked up to it, a dead woman. She had medium skin and long, brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her black turtleneck and brassiere had been pulled above her breasts, and her green jogging pants and underwear yanked to her knees. It appeared that she had only been dead a few hours, although once the government stepped into the investigation, the story became that she'd been dead for two days.

Within a few hours the story had been posted on several Juárez news websites. More than a year had passed since a woman had been murdered, and the city had awaited the next victim with a mix of suspense and anticipation. Hopes had grown that the end of the women's murders finally had come. For this reason the response to the March 10 finding was quick and alarmed, and everyone attempted to read its intended message: It had happened a month after V-Day, when feminist celebrities and thousands of protesters had gathered in Juárez demanding answers from the Juárez and Chihuahua governments. Or two days after the International Day of Women. Or two days after the state's attorney general, Jesús José "Chito" Solís, had resigned from his office amid mounting

claims that he had links to organized crime. Or the day that the new attorney general was sworn in. Or the day that four senators from a national congressional committee formed to investigate the women's murders had come to Juárez to ask about the crimes. Observers were certain that this was meant as a direct challenge to them, to make a mockery of their visit.

I set out across the border in 77-degree weather, the sky a cinnamon roll of white clouds swirled with blue. At 2:25 p.m., vendors on the streets in Juárez were already hawking the last edition of the paper. I rolled down my window and waved my four pesos to one of them, who ran over to get them and handed me a copy. A photo taken just a few feet from the woman's remains took up the top half of the front page. Her ankles were crossed and her bare feet twisted in opposite directions. She had the thick, cakey soles of a poor woman.

To arrive at the Cristo Negro mountain, one had to head west along the border towards the shantytown of Anapra, then turn left in front of a blocky convenience store on a street called Arroyo del Mimbres. From there it's a jaunty ride uphill. The pavement wears quickly and the pebbly dirt road left underneath veers left and right, branching off into narrow side streets that meander toward the foot of the mountains and make for an easy wrong turn. The dust floated everywhere. Even with my windows shut I could feel my lip gloss grow thick and grainy. Dodging potholes, I finally arrived at the entrance to the sand and gravel pit, which is owned by a Mexican company called Pimsa. There was a gravel road and no guard, so I drove in, the sun beating through my windshield.

The place was eerily quiet. As I gazed at the empty, pimpled expanse of brown and grey land, I felt my insides shift. It almost felt haunted by death: Six more young women's bodies had been recovered in the area between December 2002 and February 2003.⁸¹ I'd actually attended the funerals of three of the victims, whose bodies had been stumbled upon by some young boys who were out playing. I remembered their families' chilling cries of grief, and the memory shattered the silence that surrounded me.

I drove up and down hills for a while without finding any traces of the crime scene that had unfolded that morning. Early this year Mexican President Vicente Fox had ceremoniously dispatched 100 troops to Juárez, a special prosecutor and a human rights commissioner whose sole job was to assess the city's social ills. The federal government's initiatives had been intended to supplement the state's law enforcement bureaucracy, which counted its own special prosecutor for crimes against women and an office that monitored human rights. On top of all this, Juárez now had a federal prosecutor whose office was dedicated solely to the investigation of organized crime. The finding of a body that morning provided the first opportunity to gauge the effectiveness of the newly coordinated government efforts. The entire group of officials had shown up at the crime scene, bringing several others along. Even the four visiting senators had come to the Cristo Negro, eager to witness one of the infamous women's murders

⁸¹ Villalpando, Rubén. "Aseguran cantina donde presuntamente asesinaron a una mujer de 23 años." *La Jornada*. April 3, 2004.

with their own eyes. The main reason I had come was to watch this new government regime at play. To see if there was hope for Juárez, after all.

Since I had found nobody left at the crime scene, I thought of trying the state government's offices next, where the investigation was surely unfolding now. I made my way out of the mountain and headed toward the city's far south. I was rounding a curve on Eje Juan Gabriel, a smooth, three-lane boulevard, when I spotted a policeman next to a motorcycle who was waving at me with an orange flag. I slowed to a stop, my stomach turning. The police in Juárez are notorious for scamming traffic violators. I knew there was a special code one had to speak with them in order to escape these situations as painlessly as possible – and this code had to do with money – but I wasn't confident enough to speak it. As I rolled down my window, I wondered how bad this could get.

The cop, who wore a white helmet and a dirty chest pad, had a surprisingly high voice. His face had turned red with the sun, and he sported a wiry moustache that reminded me of an old-fashioned broom.

"You have to diminish your speed," he told me in the language of Mexican government formality. "You were going 80 (kilometers per hour)."

I racked my brain for something to say. "How do you know that?" I replied.

"Because of my radar. Can I see your license?"

I pulled out my wallet, careful not to flash my credit card and nervous that I was handing him the only identity card I was carrying with me. He took it with his

left hand and studied it for a second, then began scribbling on a ticket pad as though he was taking down my information. "We are going to have to keep this until you appear in person to pay your fine," he said. "But, it won't be ready for you to pick up at the Babícora station until tomorrow morning."

I cringed. I would need my license to cross back into El Paso today. "How much will it be?" I asked him.

"About 420 pesos."

I paused. I had a feeling there was something I was supposed to tell him at this point, but I was lost.

He must've detected this, because he stepped in to the rescue. Without looking at me, he said, still scribbling in his notepad, "Do you want me to write down that it was less than that?" He turned and sneezed at the pavement.

This I understood, and at first I felt a sense of relief: Hand him a \$20 bill, take your license, and none of this ever happened. I would be back on my way to the state prosecutor's office with my identity safeguarded in my purse. But then a second set of thoughts crossed my mind. I remembered a New York Times Magazine article I had once read in which the writer, who lived in Mexico City, had argued that Mexican corruption exists most basically because the country's bureaucracy is so clunky and ineffective that residents are left to their own devices in dealing with it. And yet, each seemingly minor act of corrupting an official helps to corrode the larger system, which ends up oppressing us in more significant ways.

Now I could understand the temptation. And yet, didn't my own research have to do in some ways with the aftershocks of corruption?

The cop was growing impatient with my internal debate. "Or would you rather pay that instead?" he asked me.

"I'll pay that instead."

"Very well, *señorita*," he said. He stuffed my driver's license into his shirt pocket and handed me the yellow slip of paper on which he'd been scribbling. I glanced at my ticket: there was nothing written in the blank where he was supposed to have recorded my speed. I rolled up my window and drove off, watching through my rearview mirror as he flagged down his next target.

At that time, the offices of the Fiscalía Mixta para la Investigación de Homicidios de Mujeres en Ciudad Juárez – the prosecuting office for the investigation of murders of women – were housed in a nondescript state government building that had whitewashed walls and green trim, just a few blocks down from the state penitentiary. Having parked out front, I pushed through the building's glass doors and was eyed disinterestedly by a young man in a business jacket, possibly a prosecutor or an investigator. I told him I was interested in speaking with Angela Talavera, who was then the special prosecutor. He told me that she was tied up with a case and that he wasn't sure she could see me, but that I could have a seat while he checked.

From past experiences at the state prosecutor's office, I knew that Ms. Talavera and her staff would be hauling in potential witnesses throughout the day, trying to gather information about the murder and perhaps looking for someone on who to pin the crime. In reality I had no real urgent questions for Ms. Talavera, who I knew would be unwilling to share much other than the crime's basic details, which had already been reported in the news. I was more interested in seeing what transpired in the office as the government attempted to build an investigation that would satisfy the public, or at least give the impression that their elected officials were actually making an effort to enforce the law.

A polarized glass door that led into a side office swung open, and a girl that I figured was somewhere in her early to mid-teenage years walked out, scuffing the floor with the bottom of her tennis shoes. She was dark-skinned and medium-built, and her hair was slicked back in a bun. "Is there a bathroom here?" she demanded to know, as though she owned the place. The suited investigator who'd escorted her out of the office ordered her to wait. The girl frowned and plopped her body down on a chair beside a young teenage boy who also sat in the waiting room. He had a round head, prickly black hair, and dark acne scars spread over his cheeks. He sported red Converse sneakers and a New York Yankees baseball jersey that seemed ten sizes too big.

The boy smiled at the girl, and she returned the smile coyly. She asked him, "So what did you tell them?" The two of them mumbled in consultation.

The prosecutor looked at them with a frown. "Hey, sit over there," he told the girl, directing her to sit one chair away from where I sat. She offered him a mean look before moving. Then she plopped down a second time and looked down at the floor, sulking.

When I saw that the prosecutor had moved out of earshot, I asked her: "Did they bring you in as a witness?"

"Yes," she replied, turning to study me.

"And what did you tell them?"

"It's because today they found a young woman, and I told them that I had seen two campers and that one of them had driven off in that direction."

"Police campers?"

"Yes."

"What kind of police, municipal or state?" I asked.

"Municipal," she said. She turned to the boy and flashed him a flirty grin.

Then she turned back to me and asked, "Do you got someone here?" She used the formal pronoun "*usted*" because of our difference in age.

"No, I'm waiting to see one of the attorneys," I told her. "So, when you saw the campers was it daytime or night?"

"At night," she said. "Last night."

Again the door swung open, and this time a fuller-figured young woman emerged. She walked over to where we sat and squeezed in between the other girl and me.

“Hey!” the first girl said in protest. “Don’t you see that I’m talking to her?”

Then she grinned and asked the newcomer, “So is it going to say in there that you have a lot of boyfriends?”

“What?!,” the second girl said. “They wrote that?”

“I told them!” the first one said. “It’s because they asked me who was your boyfriend, and I told them that I didn’t know, that I see you with a different one every day.” They looked at each other and burst into giggles.

“Are you sisters?” I asked them.

“No. Do we look alike?”

“No, not really, but it seems like you know each other pretty well. Are you neighbors?”

“We’re not sisters or neighbors,” the second girl said, looking at the other one. “Just friends.”

The first one turned and pointed to the young man with her chin. “He’s my Sunday boyfriend,” she said. Again the girls giggled, and the boy looked at the floor and shook his head, smiling.

I asked the two girls if they lived close to where the body had been found that morning.

“They just came and got us,” the first girl said, referring to the state’s investigators. “That’s what I get for being such a flirt. I saw that a white car was coming and I said, ‘Who is it?’ Then I looked and I said, ‘Ah, shit, it must be a

judicial. He asked my dad, 'can I borrow her?', and my dad actually said yes!"

She rolled her eyes in disbelief. That is how she'd ended up as a witness.

The second girl chimed in, "And they treat us really bad."

"They talk to us really ugly," the first girl continued. "Once we got here, the guy told us, 'Get down, bitch!'"

"Even though we're doing them a favor!"

"Ay," the first girl said. "I wanna leave. They've had us here for a long time already."

I asked her how long.

"Since two."

"No," the other one said, "since three."

I looked at my watch – it was 5:35 p.m.

The first girl wasn't done telling her story. "And then they took us to where they found the woman..."

As she said this, the door to the side office swung open yet again and an official-looking woman walked out. "Come on, girls," she ordered. It appeared she was taking them to yet another office.

"Shit, they're going to send us with that old lady," the first girl told her friend, and then explained to me, "I hate her."

The two girls groaned before plopping up from their chairs and scuffling out. The fact that they had witnessed police campers near the crime scene on the night of the murder seemed to me one lead worth pursuing. But I doubted the

state's investigators would follow up. The parade of witnesses through the special prosecutor's office seemed to serve but one purpose: to help maintain an official veneer. To assure *juarenses* that their government still worked.

The sky had turned dark by the time I located the state government's newly built morgue – behind the police station where I eventually recovered my driver's license. A boxy brick building with dim lights all around it, it was a place where I knew I might find another group of investigators who were on the case. While a body can offer many clues about the perpetrator of a crime, for government officials in Ciudad Juárez what often seems more important is what it says about the victim: whether she deserved or was responsible for the violence that was inflicted on her. Entrance into the building was highly restricted, so I loitered outside without a plan. Because the government had yet to reveal the victim's identity, several anguished families had also come to the morgue, hoping to find out if the body found that morning belonged to a loved one who was disappeared.

A man standing against the wall studied me as he drew a puff from a cigarette. When I looked at him, he offered a faint smile and said he recognized me. He introduced himself: he was an investigator from Mexico City, part of a team assigned to Juárez to assist the federal prosecutor who was responsible for organized crime. We had met precisely a year ago, shortly after he and his boss had first arrived to Juárez and agreed to an off-the-record meeting with Diana Washington Valdés, an El Paso Times reporter who had graciously showed me

around the city. Diana had invited me to come as long as I didn't reveal that I was a journalist. We met for dinner at an elegant Chinese restaurant in Juárez called the Shangri-la. I hadn't said much throughout most of the night. Toward the end, however, the conversation had turned light, and when one of the men talked about having worked in along the northeastern part of the Mexican border I had mentioned that my parents were originally from Tamaulipas.

I was surprised to have run into this person again, and the introduction served to break the ice. I asked him what he thought of the body that had been found that morning. He wasn't worried and seemed confident the case could be resolved because of who the victim was. When I asked him what he meant by this, he described the marks on her arms that suggested she was a drug user.

It was interesting to witness first-hand how easily female murder victims in Juárez are discredited. If the woman happened to be linked with anything shadowy – whether she used drugs or was a barmaid or a sex worker – the implication is that she somehow “asked for it.” This had been the state government's attitude since the first were found in the early and mid-1990s, and part of the process of investigating a crime involves determining whether a victim can be discredited on any of these grounds. Although we had yet to learn who had killed this woman – it was later revealed her name was Rebeca Contreras Mancha – I had learned much today about the government's investigative rituals.

Our conversation turned to other things. Like many of the investigators who are sent to Juárez, this one was a Mexico City native. I could tell by the way he

spoke, and he confirmed my suspicions. When I asked him what impressions he had of Juárez in the year he'd lived here, he went off about how much he disliked it. "It's just that this is a really ugly city," he told me, "and people don't care about anything. They don't remember anything."

Again, I asked him what he meant by this.

"Do you remember where you went to the university?" he said.

"Yes," I replied.

"Do you remember who you went to high school with?"

"Mhm."

"You remember the mischief you did as a child?"

I nodded. I understood his point, and it was an interesting one. He was implying that Ciudad Juárez is a city that wipes out one's memories, that erases the past. Indeed, many Mexicans share the notion that Juárez is a rootless city – though I've seen evidence that contradicts that. In the imagination of a nation that lives for its rich history, however, Juárez stands in sharp contrast as a city that has lost its soul because it looks so much to the future.

I asked him if he really thought people in the megalopolis that is Mexico City had a better sense of community.

"No," he said, "but at least the people there remember."

At that moment the front door of the morgue swung open and the man's supervisor walked out, zipping up a black jacket. It seemed the work's day was

done. The agent explained to him who I was and asked if he remembered our meeting at the Shangri-la. His boss looked at me.

“March 5, 2003, at the 19th hour,” he said.

My face must have registered my surprise. I had known that part of the culture of Mexican authority involves intimidating people by making them feel watched – I knew this from personal experience – but the preciseness of his memory gave me chills: I had no recollection of what month or day or time we’d met.

He proceeded to recite exactly what I had dined on that night. Then he began to retreat as his men followed behind him. He smiled coyly, obviously satisfied by my reaction. His last words to me were, “And you drank coffee.”

Rancho Grande

Before I moved away from Juárez, I wanted to see Rancho Grande. In many writings about Mexican migration as in my mother's recollections of her childhood and youth, the countryside is where memories and dreams reside. It is the antithesis of the city: it stands for family, community, roots, identity, peace. These are the things that presumably get traded for modernity, for progress, for a future. Looked at in retrospect, the country offers a romanticized past against which to contrast the disappointing present.

Irma, however, wasn't prone to these flights of the mind. When I told her that I wanted to visit her hometown and asked if she would come with me, she squarely expressed disinterest. But she suggested Zulema might want to come, and when she said this Zulema perked up.

At one point following Esmeralda's death, Irma had become fed up with Zulema's insubordination and had sent her off to her family in Zacatecas as a last-ditch effort to straighten her out. Zulema spent the summer in Rancho Grande, and although nobody in Juárez knew how exactly she had kept herself busy she had fallen in love with the place. But the excursion had ended abruptly without much warning. Irma had sent \$100 to help defray her daughter's expenses, but not knowing what it was for Zulema had spent it on clothes. She was promptly shipped back to Juárez as punishment.

I have to say, the idea of driving through Mexico with Irma's teen daughter unnerved me. Rancho Grande was a twelve-hour drive from Juárez through mostly

desolate land. Did Irma really trust me that much, or was she naïve? I trusted myself, but I had less confidence in my tires and the erratically paved Mexican highways and the soldiers at the several military checkpoints we would have to pass in three states. Then again, Zulema and I had never had a chance to be alone, and I had started to think that the silence between us was simply impenetrable. The idea of spending 24 hours in a car with her was enticing. Besides, now that Irma had suggested it, Zulema seemed thrilled. How could I disappoint her?

A plan was hatched.

When I pulled up to Irma's home in Los Ojitos the following week in June, Zulema popped out of the house within seconds. It was obvious she had invested a lot of time in getting herself ready for the trip. She was dressed in a tiny jean skirt and a close-fitting jean jacket, and her hair was tied up in a perfect ponytail that was wrapped in orange ribbon. She was wearing her favorite white high-top tennis shoes and a pair of sunglasses that she kept on her face the whole time she was in the car. She smelled of the Jennifer Lopez perfume I had recently gifted her on her fifteenth birthday.

For the first couple of hours on the road she said absolutely nothing. I attempted to engage her in conversation but her replies to my questions mostly came in the form of short yeses and nos. Tired of trying, I decided to play some music for while. I hadn't planned ahead and thought there was nothing in my CD changer she would enjoy, except, well, maybe Daddy Yankee. The only reason I

owned the smashing new release of the Puerto Rican rapper⁸² is that I had recently joined a mail-order music club and had received a dozen free albums for signing up. I hit the play button and the hard thump of reggaeton music wafted through my Jeep Liberty. I glanced sideways at Zulema: To my relief, she seemed surprised and pleased. Thank goodness for Daddy Yankee! Communication was never a problem for us after that. Music had established a level of identification and trust that words could not achieve.

After that, we were able to talk about what she liked and disliked. I learned that Zulema loved to dance reggaeton and hip-hop. She enjoyed the music of Snoop Dog, Eminem and Tego Calderón. She also shared that her favorite animals were owls, because of their large eyes; cows, because of their spots; and dogs. She liked every color but pink. She loved to watch old horror movies in black-and-white and was terrified of snakes and centipedes: She'd heard stories about snake-monsters who liked women and would grab their breasts and rape them, and so she preferred to stay away. She didn't like the flavor of alcohol. She disapproved of women who did drugs or were "easy" or who married early – she told me she

⁸² Having previously recorded in Puerto Rico, Daddy Yankee's album *Barrio Fino*, released in July 2004, was his mainstream breakthrough – and an instant sensation in the United States and beyond. It climbed to the top of the Top Latin Albums Chart and remained there for a year, becoming the definitive album of its time. The songs "Gasolina" and "Lo Que Pasó, Pasó" became iconic of reggaeton, a music style that had flourished in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where DJ's had begun spinning hip-hop music alongside dancehall reggae while vocalists sang freestyle over the beat. Daddy Yankee made the music marketable and palatable to a wide range of audiences, transcending cultural and genre boundaries. Reggaeton was also the rage in Ciudad Juárez during during the time I did my fieldwork there in 2004-2005. (See www.starpulse.com/Music/Daddy_Yankee/Biography/.)

planned to wait until she was thirty years old. She enjoyed writing and drawing, like her father. She described to me the intricate, flawless images of mermaids and Virgins and Jesus Christs that he liked to draw. Since her sister's death, she also disliked all baby girls and people who named their children "Esmeralda."

We talked about her short stint in middle school. I thought it was unfortunate that Zulema had dropped out of school, and I wondered what some of the reasons were. Zulema described a rigid world of rules and regulations. She told me stories about "El Perfecto," Mr. Perfect, the nickname students gave to a school administrator who was responsible for ensuring that they wore their uniform perfectly – there was a ban on short skirts, jewelry, and any sweaters or coats besides the school jacket. She had liked math, science, history and civics, but her grades had not been great. She said she had failed her Spanish class because she had overlooked a single accent on her final exam, which consisted of copying a 50-page text by hand. She had failed English because the language simply wouldn't "go into her head," as she put it. And she had failed biology because everybody had, as a punishment for having made fun of their teacher when he had stood in front of the classroom flashing pictures of plants (she still got a laugh attack when she remembered this).

Zulema was actually surprised she hadn't failed all of her classes. For a while she had developed a habit of skipping school. Before she left home in the morning she would stuff a change of clothes into her backpack or put it on under her gym uniform. Once she got to school, she would ditch the uniform and board a

city bus with a friend, riding it for hours wherever it took them. Sometimes they would end up by the Cereso, the state prison in the city's southern periphery. Or they would go downtown, where they spent hours browsing the outdoor markets, purchasing barrettes for their hair. Irma never found out about her daughter's adventures. But she did get pretty tired of paying the \$200 pesos – about \$20 – the school charged her to reenroll her daughter each time she failed a class. At one point she finally wouldn't have it anymore: she told Zulema her schooling days were over. Zulema had asked her if she could enroll in school in Rancho Grande, but her mother wouldn't hear it.

The sun had begun to fade as Zulema shared her stories with me. We stopped for dinner at a small diner in southern Chihuahua. We stretched our legs; the men in the restaurant tried not to stare at Zulema. By the time we were done the sun was beginning to hide. As we pushed forward into the state of Coahuila the sky turned dark and the ground became by turns flat and mountainous. For miles at a time, we were the only vehicle riding under the stars on the smooth, two-lane highway. Occasionally an eighteen-wheeler would rumble by, but its tiny lights would quickly fade into the distance. I tried to speed up because the desolate landscape was beginning to unnerve me, but I kept hitting huge, unmarked speed bumps on the road that I knew were capable of flipping my car. Zulema seemed unfazed by any of it.

I asked Zulema about her friends and her life in her neighborhood, and learned that a young person in Juárez is forced to master an intricate map of

territorial allegiances and animosities. Zulema explained the rules to me as though I were a young initiate. Each neighborhood functions like a club with automatic membership: Even if one chooses not to belong to a gang, when push comes to shove it's safer to be identified with something than to have nobody watching your back. The names these groups call themselves reveal an argot born from the fusion of Spanish slang with American gang terminology and codes. For instance, one group is called "*Comandos 10*," in Spanish. Another is "CK," in English, which stands for "*Comandos King*," as pronounced in Spanish. "South Side" and "North Side" are pronounced in English (Zulema's versions were something like "*sau-sai*" and "*norr-sai*"). "*Mineros 13*" comes from "Miners."

Having moved homes and neighborhoods twice and met many people through her older brother Benny, Zulema took pride in the fact that she spoke with members of all groups. But she was careful not to mix friends in order to avoid confrontations. She told me stories about the times when Benny had taken her to the nightclubs on Avenida Juárez. Borrowing a car to go was safer, because it was nearly impossible to avoid the fights that broke out at the bus stops when people from different groups waited for their rides home. Inside the clubs relations were a bit more controlled, although time and again someone would begin throwing signs, an act that could launch a mild war (which once ended with the police tear-gassing a mass of youth, including Zulema, on the club's front steps). At home, meanwhile, Zulema also had to negotiate her life and her circle of friends carefully. Many of the young women her age were already having sexually active.

The neighborhoods were dotted with small dealers who peddled all kinds of drugs and inhalants, making it virtually impossible to avoid them or the questionable clients who continually passed through the streets looking for them. Zulema considered herself an open-minded person, but nevertheless drew lines. She had recently stopped talking to one of her female friends after finding out that she was doing *agua celeste*, or “celestial water,” an inhalant made from an industrial paint thinner.

Since meeting her, I had perceived Zulema as a silent soul who hid from the world in her bedroom. It was fascinating to learn that I’d been wrong, and to hear about the ways in which she’d begun to maneuver the realities that awaited her as a teenage girl. Unlike her sister Esmeralda, Zulema was a product of the city, and the idealistic notions of womanhood that the Mexican country had taught her sister probably would have done little to save her from the demands that a place like Juárez imposed on girls her age and of her class. At the same time, it was hard not to feel a bit hopeless and worried for her. Most of the odds were set up to make her fall or fail; clearly it took a different kind of will power and intelligence to survive this kind of world.

I changed the subject. I asked Zulema about the time she had stayed in Rancho Grande, and her face lit up. It seemed this had been one of the best times in her life. Despite the town’s slower pace, she had never felt bored. Her grandmother (Irma’s biological mother) still ran a small eatery out of her home where she fed the truck drivers and other men who came every harvest season to

work the fields. Zulema enjoyed being sent off to buy the tortillas, even if it meant spending untold amounts of time waiting in line. She would socialize with her cousins, especially two females who were around her same age. They had an uncle who would occasionally gather them at night and drive them through the wilderness for fun in the back of a pick-up truck: She remembered the freezing cold, the owls that swooped by, and how hard it was to keep from going to the bathroom. Whenever there was a wedding everyone in Rancho Grande was automatically invited, and the boys all wanted to dance with Zulema, who was the new girl, but she felt too shy to say yes. She described how they danced the “*vívora de la mar*” in a group, the guests forming a human chain behind the bride and groom, and how the beer never stopped flowing. She remembered the clouds of dust that rose from the packed earth as the stomping went on into the early morning hours.

By the time the twinkling lights of Rancho Grande appeared in the distance, the young woman sitting next to me was a different person. I smiled from both excitement and relief. We had gotten a late start on the road, so it was already close to 1 a.m. I had asked Zulema if we should stay in a hotel in nearby Fresnillo until the next morning, to avoid waking her family. But she was too eager to wait for the sun to rise. She wanted to barge in on her grandmother while she slept and surprise her with her presence.

Rancho Grande is hardly what its name suggests: It is neither a ranch nor large. It is an *ejido*, a Spanish term for what began as a communal landholding, although individual parcels of land were eventually deeded and sold into private hands. Visually it consists of a small spread of homes on the west side of highway MEX 49, about fifteen minutes before one arrives to the city of Fresnillo, the seat of the municipality that includes Rancho Grande. The area is known as the Plateros region after its silver mines, which constitute the largest source of the mineral in the world. Approaching Rancho Grande, you see a spread of low-slung trees that look like broccoli florets bordering fields of harvest. There are clusters of cacti throughout. The town itself is a collection of streets ambling in every direction with no obvious plan or grid; somewhere between half and three-fourths of the roads are paved, and the rest are covered with a mix of dirt and rock. The homes are simple and imperfect. Most are built out of brown brick lobbed together with gobs of an orange-brown cement. A few are made from cinder block and painted in bright shades – aqua-green, melon-pink, yellow. The ones that are the color of earth have purple or blue doors, like in New Mexico. All of the houses are low and straight-roofed. A number of buildings were abandoned in the midst of construction – it's unclear if temporarily or permanently – leaving stacks of bricks with weeds growing between them: the tell-tale sign of a community that exports its men to the United States. Zulema's grandmother lives on a dirt street, in a long, green cinder-block home with ornate white bars on the windows.

The village is tranquil at all hours of the day. In the evening, the men sit or lie on the sidewalks in front of their homes, idling. The women cross the streets stoop-shouldered, still wearing their aprons after a day of chores. The boys throw rocks at each other. The teenage girls walk side-by-side, often holding hands. All of the residents know each other, and they glance at visitors with a mix of suspicion and curiosity. A few lazy dogs are folded in front of homes, and roosters walk gingerly across yards or atop brick fences.

After dropping off Zulema the night before, I had checked into a hotel in Fresnillo, then spent the morning visiting with the city's historian. By the time I arrived at Rancho Grande in the afternoon, a special event was underway. It was graduation day for the village's sixth-graders. It seemed most of the town had congregated at the elementary school, Escuela Primaria Emiliano Zapata. I parked my car and joined them. The mothers came with their children, each carrying a plastic chair from home. Some brought dinette chairs or empty buckets that were turned upside-down and made into seats. They carried presents wrapped in shiny foil. Even the men who happened to be passing the school stopped and watched the entire ceremony, seated atop their horses or standing on the bed of old pick-up trucks. The girls who were graduating wore sky-blue gowns their mothers had sewn in different designs but the same fabric. Their hair was twisted on top of their heads in various hairstyling inventions. The boys wore sky-blue dress shirts, navy blue slacks and ties, and black belts and shoes. There were smaller children dressed in jeans and cowboy shirts and hats, or long, flowing *norteño* skirts, who

began the affair by performing several regional dances from northern Mexico. They were followed by a troop of children dressed as miniature elderly people, who performed *el baile de los viejitos*, a traditional dance from the southern state of Michoacán in which the masked dancers comically hop and skip to the music like ailing grandparents.

After the dancing was over the event took a solemn turn. One by one, the thirty-four graduates were recognized and introduced to the audience. Two of the students walked up to the microphone and recited pre-prepared speeches that touted the value of the education they had received and the virtue of their noble country. The second boy who spoke concluded his talk with gentle, sentimental words, "Beloved school, today we must go. With all of your children, we leave you. Like all mothers, do you forgive us?" I felt my eyes grow moist. I was touched by the formality and deep sincerity with which the children expressed their gratitude for the only years of schooling most of them would ever be entitled to in life.

A slim young woman announced the closing act. She told us about the waltz, explained its history in Europe and how it had become the ballroom dance par excellence. "The most sublime moment has arrived," she said. The elegant music began, and the graduates waltzed out onto the basketball court, boys with their hands clasped behind their back, girls with their arms at the side, all of them looking at the ground in shyness. They waltzed for several songs until the last tune

concluded, and then the boys got down on one knee and the girls rested a high heel on the other, and the audience applauded loudly.

Afterwards I ran into Zulema outside the school fence, a devious smirk spread across her face. She was in the company of a female cousin who appeared to be the same age and a smaller boy who looked like he was ready for some action. Zulema beamed when she saw me. "*Ella es la periodista*," she told her crew: "The Journalist." I didn't know that was my name. I guess it made more sense to her and her family than when I tried to explain this convoluted thing I practiced called "*antropología*." Noemí, the cousin, smiled warmly at me. I noticed how pretty she was. Both she and Zulema wore tube tops – Zulema's significantly smaller – which showed off their tight, flat brown bellies. Noemí wore jeans, but Zulema had slipped into a skirt that seemed impossibly shorter than anything I'd ever seen her wear. Her skinny ankles were swimming in her white tennis shoes. Her jean jacket was tied around her waist, and her sunglasses sat atop her head. She had straightened out her hair and wore long, dangly silver earrings. The boy who was with them had on baggy jeans, a red polo-style shirt, and a red baseball cap turned sideways. He introduced himself as Beto, for Roberto. "I'll be nine in January," he said to me proudly. He pulled out a spray can out of his back pocket and smiled gleefully: crazy string! The plan was to spray it on unsuspecting bystanders in an attempt to make the festivities a little more lively. He was considerate enough to warn me of the repercussions: "Be careful, it stains your clothes."

Zulema filled me in on what I'd missed while I was in Fresnillo. She told me she was supposed to have attended the graduation with her aunt Sonia, Irma's sister, since one of Sonia's daughters was one of the graduates. She was also supposed to have been staying at her aunt's home, since Irma still held a life-long grudge against her mother. But because we'd arrived late the night before, Zulema had slept with her grandmother and now didn't want to transfer over to Sonia's, especially because 16-year-old cousin Noemí was also staying at their grandmother's house. The issue was complicated because the adults in the family didn't like Noemí, because her mother had run off with Irma's second husband, Zulema's father, after he and Irma separated. Sonia was doubly hurt. According to Zulema, she was not talking to her, and Sonia's daughter Ilse, who was also Zulema's age, was at home sulking because her cousin had traded her for another cousin. The story made my head spin, but Zulema shrugged. She was used to these internecine family feuds and found them rather absurd. Who cared what had happened between hers and Noemí's mothers? That was their problem. Besides, the two girls understood each other better than anyone else did.

The trio was now eager to show me the town. First they walked me to La Casa Grande, "The Big House," the remains of what had once been a Spanish hacienda. Rafael Pinedo Robles, Fresnillo's historian, had talked to me about the hacienda that morning. Established in 1700 by the Count of San Mateo and Valparaíso, it once employed thousands in agriculture and ranching. The peasants who worked there also produced soaps, wax products such as candles, and

products made of animal skins, a practice known as “*cuetiduría*” in Spanish. They toiled in a form of indentured servitude and were compensated for their labor in “*tlacos*,” copper coins that could only be traded for goods in the hacienda store. In the 1930s, however, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas introduced a program of agrarian reform that eliminated large estates (known as *latifundios* in Spanish) and established the *ejidos*, collective farms that were intended to end agrarian capitalism and reduce economic inequality in the nation. Much of the lands that belonged to the *hacendados* were divvied up, and the glory years of the haciendas came to an end. The last private owner of the Casa Grande, in the 1950s, was a man who served as Mexico’s secretary of the exterior. Beto took special delight in introducing me to the crumbling plaster hulk that once housed the Hacienda de Rancho Grande, its patio now teeming with weeds. He spread his small arms wide and said dramatically, “This was owned by a man named Manuel Tello, but he died. He’s buried here somewhere, but we don’t know where. And there’s gold under all this.”⁸³

When we were done visiting the ghosts of the Casa Grande Zulema and her crew led me to the village square so I could visit the parish church. Two weeks before, the people of Rancho Grande had celebrated the feast day of *El Señor de las Maravillas*, the Lord of Marvels. A statue of the celebrated saint was inside the church. Zulema put on her jacket and shuddered as we passed through the front

⁸³ For an article in Spanish about Fresnillo’s abandoned haciendas, see simitrioq.wordpress.com/2008/04/22/haciendas-abandonadas-de-fresnillo-viejo-esplendor-de-familias-y-posesiones/.

doors – Catholic churches scared her. In the dark, we walked towards a glass shrine that contained a bloody Christ with dozens of plastic flowers arranged around his feet. It was a gory scene; for a moment I could understand Zulema's trepidation. But there were notes left by many thankful believers, and baby clothes and photos of children whose lives He'd saved.

Back outside, people strolled the plaza munching on roasted corn, snowcones and puffed *chicharrones*, fried pork rinds. They stared at us, the outsiders, and eyed Zulema and Noemí disapprovingly. The town was in the midst of setting up for a bigger celebration, one Zulema regretted we would miss. Every July 4, the village honored the *Virgen del Refugio*, the Virgin of Refuge. Already the townspeople were preparing for the huge production. Some of the food booths were already up, and the carnival rides had been hauled in and awaited assembly. A large tent housed rows upon rows of game tables that were occupied by high-energy children and teenagers playing foosball. The day of the festivities there would be masses, traditional dances, pilgrimages, music all day. At night, a brilliant fireworks display. People would stream in all week from the surrounding communities, and some of those who had left to the States would even make the long trek home. Indeed, this seemed like a village that kept its hopes and spirits up through the rituals of faith and celebration. Children left, prices rose, opportunity waned. But there was the Lord of the Marvels and the Virgin of Refuge with whom to seek solace.

Irma's sister Sonia was washing an impossibly high pile of dirty plates and cups in a small patio outside her home when I went looking for her. She sat before a ramshackle wall with all kinds of odds and ends hanging from it, such as small buckets. A yellow bird watched the activity from inside a cage, and a thousand flies buzzed about our faces and crawled up my arms as soon as I had sat down. Sonia wore a blue-and-white apron. She was a round woman with dark skin and light-brown hair that hinted towards red – what people in this area call “*güero*,” or blond. She looked at me through small eyes and shook the tip of my fingers shyly with wet hands. She told me that she was 42 years old, three years younger than Irma.

Irma and Sonia were part of a family of eight siblings, but they were two of the four who were mostly raised by their grandmother and a maternal uncle. Sonia said she was the only one of the six surviving brothers and sisters who was in touch with Irma.⁸⁴

We talked about fieldwork in Rancho Grande, its main source of labor. Mostly, people make a living either picking weeds with hoes or various kinds of chili peppers with their hands. The work is hard, but “you get used to it,” Sonia told me. She once worked the fields too, making the equivalent of \$2 in a nine-hour day. These days the working day was only going from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., but daily wages had risen to somewhere between \$10 and \$12. The lands were owned by individual residents of Rancho Grande, the gradual result of Cárdenas' agrarian

⁸⁴ Sonia later died of a rare illness in 2008.

reform. But Sonia said many of these men had started leaving the *ejido* for the United States, where they could make much more money working for someone else than being independent farmers in Mexico. This meant many of the fields had been left unplanted, which translated into fewer jobs for those who'd chosen to stay in Rancho Grande. Rafael Pinedo, the town's historian, had also explained to me how the influx of American dollars sent by migrant family members in the form of remittances drove up prices in the local economies, making it even harder for those who didn't have relatives in the States to get by. Most of the families from Rancho Grande who migrate go to Juárez on the Mexican border or to Colorado (one of Sonia's brothers lived in Denver). Given all of these economic trends, the families back home had to work harder to make ends meet; these days young girls were hitting the fields as early as age 11 or 12.

Sonia was able to spare her daughter Ilse that fate, but life for their family was less than comfortable. Ilse had turned 15 the month before, and she had celebrated with a small dinner because her family couldn't afford to give her a *quinceañera*. Ilse is thick-boned and heavyset, with long, brown hair and big, curious eyes. She is quiet and respectful; when I was present she asked her mother for permission to walk down the block to visit a friend. She is the antithesis of Zulema, I thought, but the two girls had spent all of their time together during Zulema's previous stay in Rancho Grande. It was clear that both Ilse and Sonia were still sulking about the fact that Zulema had befriended Noemí this time around.

Esmeralda, on the contrary, they remembered fondly. They offered wistful smiles when I brought up the name. Unlike Zulema, they said pointedly, Esmeralda socialized with all of her cousins. They remembered her as a prankster, and they laughed over her coquettish walk, which she had learned in a beauty pageant for little girls when she had lived in Sinaloa. "Look, she walks like a chicken!" Sonia said she would tease her. When Esmeralda went missing, Irma phoned Sonia and her mother and asked them to join them in Juárez. Sonia remembers a very broken-down woman who was persistently in tears; often when she called her, Irma couldn't even answer "hello." Sonia wondered whether she should be calling at all.

When Sonia went up to support her sister during Esmeralda's disappearance, it was the first time she visited Juárez. Though she spent most of her time huddled with her sister in her home, one day Irma took her to a *tianguis*, an open-air market, nearby. Sonia thought it a beautiful thing. She marveled at the abundance of goods and their cheap prices. Chicken cost \$8 or \$9 pesos a kilo – not the \$33 pesos it cost in Rancho Grande. Socks were \$15 pesos for three pairs – not \$20 pesos for one pair, as they were back home. "If you don't eat here, it's because you don't want to," she told Irma. "Well, you work hard, but you eat much better," Irma had replied. Sonia spoke to me about Juárez with such wonder, it begged the question whether she'd consider moving there. She told me that she had since visited Irma a second time, when her sister offered to pay for her bus ticket, but that her daughter Ilse refused to move to Juárez. Sonia said her daughter

was haunted by the stories she heard on television about what happened to the women who lived there.

Rancho Grande, by contrast, was tranquil: there were no fights, no rape, no murders. Once, Sonia recalled, a carload of “*cholos*” (as people referred to hoodlums) had come crawling through the village, but residents had immediately called an emergency number in Fresnillo and the police had come to patrol until the car left. Word had it the *cholos* were looking for a young woman from Rancho Grande who had left to Juárez and had returned “very changed,” as Sonia described it. Another time, a rumor spread that some suspicious characters in a black car were in the neighborhood in search of children to snatch, but the school’s administrators locked their doors so that nobody, not even the children’s parents, could enter. (Although story had it they were from Central America, possibly El Salvador, nobody ever proved this to be true.) In a third case, a man had tried to nab a young boy away from his mother, but a witness to the event had testified against the assailant and he was rapidly captured.

Sonia racked her memory for more incidences of violence but came up short. It was interesting to me that any time a transgression did take place in Rancho Grande, the community found the source of violence outside of itself – in the stories, the culprit was from one of those corrupted places like Juárez or Central America. As with the stories told to me by other people I’d met on the border, the countryside was experienced and imagined as a safe, protective space. What struck me more than this, however, was the fact that the people in Rancho

Grande still reacted collectively when there were threats to their safety. They trusted and called the police. They spoke out against criminal perpetrators without fear of retaliation. They looked out for each other. I asked myself if perhaps self-preservation was the single most important duty of a community, and why Juárez had ceased to see itself this way.

The last personal visit I paid during my three-day stay in Zacatecas was to the home of Irma's mother. I knew Irma did not consider her a mother and that their relationship was practically severed, so it felt like a place that was off-limits to me. I made my visit brief. Irma had warned me not to give her mother any money if she asked for it; she was always suspicious about her motives. The woman who greeted me told me she was 66 years old, but her body had aged far beyond that. She had short, black matted hair, wrinkled brown skin, and she wore glasses. Her fingers had been twisted deeply by arthritis, making them look strange and immobile. She had a large lump on one arm. She wore a long black skirt with a red tee-shirt and an apron, and she struck me as a woman who was drowning in grief and self-pity.

Irma's mother told me she had been born in the town of El Salado but raised in Rancho Grande from a small age. Her first husband had died in a mine accident in Fresnillo, and her second husband was also deceased. The event in her life that had broken her heart, however, was the death of her son Gabriel. It had happened eight years ago, but to her it felt like yesterday. The woman's eyes filled

with tears as she told me the story. He had migrated illegally to the Miami area with some childhood friends who talked him into it, seven young men from Rancho Grande. They moved in together and found jobs picking oranges, working every day but Sundays. Over time, their hard labor paid off. Every two weeks, Gabriel would wire money to his mother. He would also buy very nice things for himself: new clothes, a car, a Rolex, a television set, a blender, bed sheets and comforters.

One Sunday, Gabriel and his friends decided to spend their day off by a lake. The story that traveled back to Rancho Grande was that Gabriel had drowned, but Irma later told me there were several things that didn't add up. For one, his car and his Rolex had been stolen, and his friends never mailed any of his other possessions to his family. There was also talk that one of his friends had gotten in a fight with him over a woman and beaten him up. To this day, his death is considered a mystery. Gabriel had promised his mother he would visit her for his eighteenth birthday, but instead he came home in a coffin.

Irma's mother kept harkening back to the fact of her son's good looks, and she wanted to be sure I saw a picture of him before I left. She walked me to the foyer of the house where she lived with one of her sons and his wife. There were three large picture frames on the wall that had been crammed with more than fifty photos of Gabriel, some of them repeated multiple times. Then she took me inside one of the bedrooms, where she had hung seven 8-by-10 images of Gabriel along the top of one wall. Three of them were the same picture. It was Gabriel posing in

jeans and a cowboy hat, his hair long and curled at the neck. Gabriel posing by a pick-up truck. Gabriel standing on the beach with a friend, both of them in trousers. Each time she looked at him, his mother's eyes grew wet again. "*Y luego lo que le pasó a la muchachita de Irma,*" she said, shaking her head – and then what happened to Irma's little girl. She just couldn't bear all the sadness.

Watching Irma's mother I could not stop thinking how much she reminded her of her own daughter, who was stuck in the trauma of losing a child. For both of them, life had come to a stop since their loss. And for both of them, no other child could ever live up to the one who had gone away.

I told the woman I had to get going so that Zulema and I could get into Juárez at a safe hour. She nodded, but before she let me go, she held on to my arm. She told me how tightly she lived and how she didn't have the money she needed to buy her arthritis medications. I remembered Irma's warning, but looking into the woman's eyes, which were swimming in tears, I couldn't help it. I took a \$10 bill, folded it up and slipped it into her nub of a hand. She cried even harder, in appreciation.

And with that, Zulema and I were gone: back to the border, to the city of promise. It struck me that life for Irma and her family members was a matter of choosing the lesser of evils – the smaller of two universes of pain. The problem was, after visiting Rancho Grande, I wasn't sure if that choice pointed north or south.

The Beach

The streets of downtown Juárez showered Zulema with flattery when she graced them.

“¡*Morena!*”

“What’s your name?”

“How lovely you are!”

“An angel must’ve fallen from the sky.”

“*Mamacita*....a song for you?”

“*Morena.*”

“Tshhh...¡*morena!*”

I knew the catcalls were not directed at me. To avoid attention, I had worn jeans and a nondescript turtleneck sweater. Zulema, on the contrary, had taken my invitation to go out on the town at face value. She had put on a miniscule white pleated skirt with small rhinestones and a stretchy aqua-blue tank top that allowed her bra to peek out from the top. A black belt sat low on her hips. Her outfit had provoked a small civil war at home. Juan had protested to Zulema that she was going to embarrass me by wearing that skirt, to which Zulema had quickly replied that if she so embarrassed him, he could simply deny from now on that he knew her. Irma, on the other hand, was more accustomed to losing these battles. She sometimes bought her daughter the kinds of clothes she thought were appropriate for a fifteen-year-old, but Zulema sold them off to friends and used the profits to purchase items that were more to her liking. Tonight, she’d at least succeeded in

convincing Zulema to trade her customary high-topped tennis shoes for a pair of dainty, high-heeled sandals, which Zulema found impossible to walk in.

I glanced over at this girl-woman beside me, who smiled broadly at the compliments while avoiding eye contact with the men who paid them. Her body was still perfectly linear, without the full hips that marked the women in her family, and her legs were long and brown and thin, like the legs of a ten-year-old. Her face, however, had blossomed into the face of a young lady. Tonight she had straightened out her coarse hair and tied half of it back with a rubber band and a gold clip. Her face was thick with make-up, but she had chosen more subtle colors than usual. Her thick lips were covered with a red-pink gloss, and her eyelids were brushed over in white and light gray shadows. She had traced her large eyes with black eyeliner and mascara. Only her eyebrows, which she had penciled in, seemed slightly garish. All in all, I found her beautiful.

It had been some time since Zulema walked down Juárez Avenue. A year or two before, her brother Benny had introduced her to the nightclubs along the famous street, which ends at the international bridge to El Paso and which, in better days, had found itself teeming with American teenagers. Now it was mostly Juárez residents who came. Sunday evenings featured teen night, known as “*tardeadas*” in Spanish, and doors opened in the afternoon. Benny and Zulema would take the bus into town with other friends. Through these excursions Zulema had discovered a world beyond her own, one that temporarily united young people from throughout the sprawling city in one dynamic, sometimes volatile place.

Zulema had recalled excitedly the more than one occasion on which brawls between teenagers from different parts of Juárez had ended with threats and broken bottles.

I had not been all that enthusiastic when I had invited Zulema to come out with me tonight. I still felt uneasy knowing how much Irma trusted me with her safety. Still, it was a rare opportunity for me to see Juárez through the teenager's eyes. After having spent the first year since her sister's death at home, Zulema had come to the conclusion that life moved on, and it was up to her whether she wanted to move with it. As she had left her childhood behind, it was on these streets that she had had to learn how to make sense of the world around her.

She told me we'd go to a place called *La Playa*. The building itself was marked in English: "The Beach – Ibiza." I paid the \$25 pesos (about \$2.50) it cost for each of us to get in. Ibiza, it turned out, was anything but sunny. The club was elongated and dark, with walls and ceilings both painted in black. The floor was a dirty black-and-white checker, and the stage was decorated in black and white wave-shaped mosaics. The walls had swimming fish and dolphins painted throughout. There were cheap glass-stained windows in the shape of palm trees, and the chairs had palm trees and frogs carved on their backs. The deejay spun his music out of a boat that seemed to be suspended in midair. There was a small second-floor balcony for people who wanted to be noticed, and two cages for the young women to dance in. The beer of choice that night was XX Lager, which sold for around \$1. Although there was no minimum age requirement to get into

the club, a man hawked bottles to anyone who would take them – with little success, initially.

The door had opened at 8 p.m., but one and a half hours later, there were still only a couple dozen teenagers in the room. Clusters of females stood on the dance floor, swaying nonchalantly to the hip-hop music as they gossiped into each other's ears. All the attention was for the young women: the boys stared at the girls, and the girls stared at each other. In terms of appearance, there were two general categories among them: girls who were dressed in stereotypically feminine ways, and girls who were dressed like the boys. The first group wore sexy tank-tops like Zulema's, impossibly tight jeans, and high heels. Their hair was arranged in braids and ponytails and decorated with glittery clips and ribbons. The second group of young women dressed in American gangster-style clothes: baggy jeans, clunky white tennis shoes, and oversized white and red tee-shirts with the black, gothic spelling of their boyfriends' gang names or their neighborhood's affiliation across their backs. Some wore bandannas on their heads. Their eye make-up was exaggerated, their look defiant. They had learned to stare like the men, and there was a general feeling that one should make as little eye contact with them as possible in order to stay out of trouble. I was surprised to see that none of the young women I saw was drinking. A few smoked, flicking their ashes carelessly on the floor. In her normal attire, Zulema would've fallen somewhere between the two groups – a girly girl with chunky shoes and a smile that hinted at insubordination. Tonight, however, she was all sweetness and femme.

The boys wore loose, long shorts or jeans that hung dangerously low from their hipbones. Their shoes were big and their sports jerseys or long-sleeve shirts extra-extra-large. Baseball caps rested high atop their heads, or else they donned bandannas or other swaths of fabric across their foreheads. Some wore plastic gold-colored medallions that seemed to have come from bubblegum machines (making me wonder if their glaring inauthenticity was in fact central to the aesthetic). Others had on imitation Gucci sunglasses. Aside from the knock-offs, nobody wore recognizable brands of any kind. Their clothes struck me as being vastly inexpensive – which was not to say it had been easy to afford them.

Some of the young men sat atop speakers and watched the girls who were congregated on the dance floor. Some of the boys were dancers: they twisted and slid their feet, hopped forward and back, did clever little moves that Zulema admired from where we stood against the bar. She informed me that she could dance just like that, but tonight she was a prisoner to her tight shoes. So instead she closed her hands in small fists and grooved from side to side: knees flexing, hips rocking forward and back. She looked off into the distance, successfully trying to look disinterested. When one young man stopped a few inches away from her face and let his eyes crawl dramatically down her body, stopping at her chest, then back up to her face, Zulema simply continued to look forward as though he did not exist at all. When another boy paused to whisper something into her ear, she threw her head back and let out a quick, dramatic laugh.

Although I had been to plenty of seedy bars in Juárez, I had been terribly unprepared for this scene. My body was incredibly tense, and I was second-guessing my decision to have brought us here. But in her careful performance, Zulema was more at ease than I'd ever seen her. This was a space that made sense to her, whose rules she recognized. She was additionally delighted that I was with her. Although we look nothing alike, she told the boys who stopped that we were sisters. (She also told them I was sixteen, which I found hilarious.) It occurred to me that La Playa was a microcosm of young Juárez. One young man boasted to Zulema that he lived in Kansas. Another tried to sell her a fake passport. Two municipal policemen stood by the door and occasionally looked in with bright flashlights. But some of the young women in the club made sure to keep them busy, taking turns talking and flirting shamelessly with them.

As 10:30 p.m. approached, the trickle of teenagers turned into streams. They began to crowd the dance floor, standing in mobs. The girls in gangster clothes stayed in the middle of the stage, and the boys formed two human walls that faced each other on either side. As the space filled up Zulema suggested we walk further toward the center so that we wouldn't end up getting bumped off the dance floor. The music blared and everyone swayed to its beat. Every time a tune would transition to a new one, the teenagers would chant their neighborhood's moniker in English – "*wesss saiii!*" – and they would lift their hands in the air and make signs. A serious-looking bouncer stood in the middle of this tumultuous

mass. Every time they threw a sign, he would make an angry face and beam his flashlight over the youths' heads.

After a while the music switched to reggaeton. Now the room was seriously grooving. Some girls had climbed on top of the speakers to dance, and a few boys followed them, lacing their arms around the girls' tiny waists so that they moved to the same rhythm. On the dance floor, I noticed a different dance ritual. First, a boy would ask a girl if she wanted to dance. If she acquiesced, he placed his hands ever-so-softly on her hips, as though he was highly aware of the transgression. If a more daring boy walked up to a girl and started dancing in a sexually suggestive way, he would get a ridiculing laugh and a push from her. I estimated the ratio of males to females at seven-to-one. Some of the young men purchased entire beer buckets and passed the bottles back over their heads to whoever would take them. The alcohol was flowing more freely now. Atop the speakers, the dancing had gotten steamy.

By this point almost everyone was making signs with his or her hands and chanting the name of some gang affiliation. Zulema looked at me a bit shyly and asked if she could do the same. Resigned – and no longer clear if I was the caretaker or the one being taken care of – I shrugged.

At this point there were two bouncers on the dance floor, and as they flicked their lights at the teeming dance mob it struck me that La Playa served as a metaphor for the city. I got the impression that this was Juárez incarnated: an amalgamation of feuding groups of youth. Youngsters like Zulema, who perhaps

felt a bit lost in life and who had little to hold on to – no lifesaver but themselves and their neighborhood allies. The bouncer's job was to somehow manage the rowdy rivalries as they attempted to co-exist, to prevent the underlying tensions from exploding. A thousand silent conversations were being had in this room. And yet, this was where these teens recognized themselves, where they tentatively experienced a sense of belonging and where they even felt a little bit safe. It was a jarring and bittersweet realization: This was the Juárez that Zulema understood and that understood her.

Marta Lizbeth

In November 2004, 16-year-old Martha Lizbeth Hernández Moreno was murdered. Like many other young women in Juárez of her age and class, Martha attended high school in the mornings and worked afternoons and weekends at a telephone toll booth in downtown Juárez. That Tuesday, November 2, was her day off from work, which she took advantage of to catch up on school project. Sometime around 2 p.m. that day, she left a note for her mother, who sold clothing in a street market, saying that she was going to a friend's home and would be back later. Her parents expected she would return shortly before 10 p.m., when the last public bus made its round through their neighborhood in the far south part of Juárez.

But Martha never made it home. Shortly after 10 p.m., residents of the street Nopaleros Sur heard a female scream for help. Some of them assumed it was just another couple in the middle of a domestic spat. One man did step out of his home to investigate, and found a young man beating a teenage girl on the floor of an open garage in an empty house nearby. Fearing he could end up hurt if he intervened – his wife later told reporters he had a bad back – the man returned to his home and called police, but it would be a while before any help arrived.

By 10:30 p.m., a 22-year-old mechanic named Marcos Adrián Martínez – the man who was supposed to watch over the empty home while the owner was away – arrived at his mother's home on Nopaleros Sur and was alerted by a neighbor that someone was robbing the house under his care. But instead of

finding a thief, Martínez found 26-year-old José Luis Montes, who was in the midst of raping Martha Lizbeth between two vehicles parked in the garage. The girl was agonizing; Martínez later told reporters he thinks she was in the throes of death. The young mechanic grabbed Montes and began striking him with all of his might, until Montes managed to slip from his grasp and fled on foot. Martínez ran behind him, following the man as he crossed Juan Gabriel boulevard and dashed into some empty lots, where he ultimately tripped on some rocks. The police had arrived sometime during the chase, and they now came to where Martínez was holding Montes down. It had taken them some thirty minutes to find the right address; later they explained the error this way: they had driven first to Nopaleros Norte in the Colinas del Sur neighborhood, instead of Nopaleros Sur in Colinas del Norte. By the time they got it right, Martha Lizbeth was dead.

This was an extremely rare case, insofar as a young woman's attacker had actually been caught. It was even more rare that José Luis Montes willingly described what had happened – first before the Public Ministry and again for a judge. As he told it, Montes had spent that Tuesday drinking and snorting cocaine, so that by nighttime, he was fully inebriated and high. He decided he would seek out a male university instructor who had previously paid him for sex and had told him that he could visit on Tuesdays. But the man said he had visitors and turned Montes away, giving him 50 pesos, about \$5, to hitch a bus or cab ride back home. But the bus was no longer running. Instead, Montes sought shelter in an abandoned car. He was drinking the last of a bottle he'd carried with him when he

spotted Martha Lizbeth walking down Eje Juan Gabriel. Montes left the car, caught up with her, and asked if he could walk her home. She told him to leave her alone.

Martha turned the corner on Nopaleros Sur, where she lived, but Montes followed. She then saw an open garage, walked up to the home and knocked: no response. When Montes saw this, he walked up behind her and tried to force her to kiss him. She resisted and began hitting and clawing his face. Montes then slammed her body against the wall of the house, and the girl fell to the ground. He covered her mouth so that she would stop screaming and he pulled hard on her hair. With one hand, he pressed on her throat, a move which made her black out momentarily. He took advantage of this so that he could pull his pants down. But by that point, Martha had come to and had begun struggling again. This time, he used both hands on her throat. Again, she blacked out. He yanked off her pants and her underwear, pulled up her blouse and her bra, and proceeded to rape her.

Three days later, José Luis Montes, who had a 16-year-old sister, shuddered and his face grew pale when he was asked to identify Martha Lizbeth in a photograph. His face was still scratched from where she had fought back. After he was charged with the crime, he told reporters through tears: "I feel terrible. I feel like I'm a despicable human being. I join her family in their pain, because I have a family too, and I know that these things are very painful for all of my relatives. I'm very regretful for what I did, because even though I was out of my

senses I know that I did something very serious and I regret having done it. I don't know why I did it." He ultimately received a sentence of 48 years in prison.

On the surface, Martha Lizbeth's killing fit the pattern of what activists had begun to refer to as the serial or sexual murders – the roughly 92 cases then (out of about 350 murders) where either multiple bodies had been found or a single killing had reflected the same recurring traits: a teenage girl who was victimized as she moved across the city, sexually assaulted, and strangled to death. These "*crímenes sexuales*" were the cases observers thought might be linked – either they involved the same killers or a similar motive. In this case, however, the criminal had been found, and perhaps disappointingly, José Luis Montes was no psychopath or a power-crazy drug kingpin acting with financial resources and police protection: He was merely a 26-year-old construction worker who had drank too much and snorted too heavily and "lost his senses." How were we to understand the broader problem of *feminicidio* in Juárez in light of this new information?

Certainly to Martha Lizbeth's family, friends, neighbors and other people who mourned the young woman's death, the question of who the killer was didn't make a difference. They experienced the murder much the same way as other *juarenses* had: it reproduced the prevailing feeling in the city of terror, insecurity and powerlessness. Neighbors demanded increased security for young women who moved at night, and the bishop who officiated the funeral Mass said the murders were the work of "people with sick minds who see the woman as merely an object of pleasure, and not as a person with all of the values, dignity, hopes, and

everything that it means to be a women.” Parents cried out the now-familiar “*ya basta*” – enough is enough – expressing a collective feeling that the attack on women was a large-scale problem that had gone on for too long now. They told reporters, “We just want our children to live in a safe city.”

For several days after Martha Lizbeth’s murder, I delayed paying a visit to her home to follow the case – to find out, among other things, who this young woman had been and what she had hoped for in her life. It seemed an instinctive thing to do, but difficult to carry out. The crime had affected me particularly strongly because I knew that Martha Lizbeth had been a twin, as I am, and I thought it would be really hard to meet her sister Tania. In any case, my friend and colleague Julián Cardona thwarted my plan. He suggested instead that we drive through the neighborhood where José Luis Montes, the killer, had lived, to see if we could glean anything about the circumstances of his life. It was a smart lesson I carried away from fieldwork training with Julián: In order to understand violence, one has to engage the context that produces it. And he meant that literally.

So there we were, Julián and I on a bright but cold weekday, rolling down Francisco Villa street in the Colonia Santa María, a poor neighborhood in the southwest part of the city. It was a neighborhood not unlike other poor neighborhoods in Ciudad Juárez: the streets were dusty and crumbling in spots, the homes a loosely stitched collection of cinder-block and cement structures built at different times and for different tastes. The streets were littered with junked

tires, the front of homes with junked couches, cars, televisions, small refrigerators – junked everything. All across the neighborhood walls, in blocky, gang-style letters, were painted names like Chino and Micro and Pinguino – a public accounting of and tribute to the neighborhood's fallen men.

From the street, José Luis Montes' home at 147 Francisco Villa appeared to consist of a tiny, one- or two-room structure. Its surrounding cinder-block wall, like the home itself, remained unpainted. Nobody answered when we rattled the metal door, but directly across the street from us, a handful of men were idling outside of a home, some of them working with what seemed like building materials. *Albañiles*, they're known as in Spanish: something between a construction worker and a day laborer. When they saw us, two or three of them came to where we stood. They wobbled some as they walked, their brows furrowed. Eyeing us a bit suspiciously, they asked if they could help.

Did they happen to know someone named José Luis Montes who lived at this home?, we asked.

He's gone, they said. He's gone. He killed a girl, but it wasn't his fault. He didn't mean to do it.

They saw Julián's camera and questioned whether we were journalists: Yes, Julián said. We were.

They started explaining to us what had happened to their neighbor, this José Luis Montes, and they quickly became agitated as they spoke. *Díganle al gobierno que le den un paro*, they urged us: Tell the government to pardon him,

to give him a break. *Sentía despecho*. He felt hurt because he had been betrayed, because he had been turned away. We pointed out it was a man who had turned him away, which they already knew but seemed to think was irrelevant to their main point here. Their insistence was on the fact that José Luis had felt betrayed, rejected. *Despecho*.

The men had lost all sense of personal space and were speaking directly into our faces, so that we could smell the heavy liquor in their breath and see into their hazy eyes. What are you on?, Julián asked coolly. They mumbled something about *agua celeste*, a cheap inhalant made of paint thinner.

Their stories came tumbling out without much prompting from us. Before we knew it, the conversation had turned to one of the men's younger brother, named Sabino – *que en paz descanse*, may he rest in peace. These were, from what they told us, critical times for men in Ciudad Juárez. Teenage boys with all the promise in the world getting gunned down for no reason, because they felt they had something to prove. Look at what happened to Sabino. Nineteen years old: Wrong place, wrong time. The pony-tailed man with plaster all over his clothes disappeared inside his house and came back carrying a varnished wood frame with a picture of a handsome, well-built man in sharp clothes. He wanted us to see how good-looking he'd been, this guy Sabino, his baby brother. His eyes had filled with tears and he struggled to speak.

This was a revelatory moment for me. Sabino had died a year before, but there was an intensity of pain in his brother's words and facial expression that

reminded me of the pain I'd witnessed when I had attended some of the murdered young women's funerals. It was a pain that seemed to overwhelm any notion of individual mourning and spoke about a much larger, deeper form of social wounding. It was something I had grown accustomed to witnessing and indeed *expected* to witness when I sat through the funerals of murdered young women or listened to their mothers' ongoing claims for justice. As scholars and activists, we had collectively construed a cultural frame in which women's pain and mourning made sense – but how were we to understand these men's wounds, this parallel universe of pain? Who or what had wounded them? And what was the context that gave meaning to those wounds? Furthermore, how did they understand justice – or should one say, the lack of justice – in working-class men's lives, as articulated in their desperate plea for a *paro*, a pardon, for a neighbor who had admitted to taking a young woman's life for no reason?

It took some time to digest what I had carried away from that day, but ultimately the experience helped me arrive at two crucial ideas I felt we had entirely missed as we tried to understand the Juárez women's murders socially, politically and intellectually. One was the question of movement and space. As Julián and I had stood on Francisco Villa street that afternoon, classes at a nearby middle school had let out, and clusters of twelve- and thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls in knee-length pleated skirts fanned out along the neighborhood's streets. I watched them from the corner of my eye as I listened tensely to the agitated man who stood less than arm's length before me, and it was evident to me that these

schoolgirls were treading on ice as they made their way home. I got the sense that this normalcy of everyday life was a very fragile one that could break down into violence at any moment – much like that singular moment when José Luis Montes “lost his senses,” as he put it, and slammed Martha Lizbeth’s body against a wall.

And yet, this is the space through which young women are forced to move across Juárez every day if they intend to work or study, since the city’s industrial parks and middle schools and high schools are far-removed from their neighborhoods and require a commute by both foot and bus that can take up to several hours. “*Poros y pandillas*” – pores and gangs – is how Julián had described the Juárez geography to me. Because of a dire lack of efficient urban planning, the city is dotted with abandoned cars, shuttered homes, and empty fields and lots where young women like Martha Lizbeth and men like José Luis Montes cross paths daily. In many cases, these are the same fields and lots – the pores, as Julián would have it – where the bodies of many murdered women as well as of male victims of drug crimes have been disposed. Interacting with these pores are the *pandillas*, and everything they stand for. A 2004 study by Juárez’s Municipal Institute of Public Security found more than 500 youth gangs in the city of about two million people, which means that a different group claims dominion over every few blocks of Juárez. According to the study, each group is composed of anywhere from ten to fifty young men and controls up to eight or ten public blocks. Its members join when they are as young as 10 years old and end up getting no more than an elementary or middle school education. By the time they

leave the gang at about age 25 to find work and begin families, they are unable to become integrated into the formal labor market. If we take into account the shifting structure of the Mexican labor market under neoliberalist policies which has made workers, and especially men, increasingly expendable, we are left with the glaring question: How are working-class men to pursue any kind of *proyecto de vida* anymore, that Latin American term that refers not only to a decent-paying job, but to the entire range of social and economic resources one needs to become a fully integrated, productive member of society?

Meanwhile, these street-level struggles for control between youth associations play out in the context of larger-scale contestations of authority that are at the core of the city's history. Wealthy landowners and politicians frequently battle over which parts of the city are to be developed industrially and residentially, depending on who benefits, while leaders of well-funded organized criminal rings – most notably drug trafficking, which produces billions of dollars of profits each year – struggle to control certain routes through the city and certain neighborhoods where illegal businesses transpire. At times, there are physical confrontations that erupt between powerful landowners and developers as they try to oust poor settlers from properties whose ownership is contested. These struggles for territorial control unfold at multiple levels, shaping the highly fractured and violently contested spaces that women have to traverse by foot daily – and indeed, the vast majority of the women who have been murdered outside of their homes have disappeared as they moved through the city, often in broad daylight.

Borrowing from critical and feminist geographers, these ideas helped me to make space and movement a centerpiece of my analysis of Juárez crime. What I'm arguing is that gender and power are constructed and continually renegotiated through these ongoing struggles for territory, turning young women into transgressors, and I read their murder and the disposal of their bodies as one attempt by their killers to assert their control over public space.

The second perspective I arrived at from having visited Francisco Villa street was what I'm referring to loosely as the problem of men and masculinity. In short, had we scholars and activists and journalists been asking the right questions about why Juárez men kill, and was "patriarchy" a satisfying explanation? The Argentine anthropologist Rita Laura Segato visited Ciudad Juárez during my stay there and made what I believe was a critical contribution to the dialogue on the women's murders. Having previously done work with convicted rapists in Brazil, she raised the prospect of masculinity as a social status that has to be continuously preserved and reinforced if men are to remain men. In this light, she reads the physical acts of torture and rape – which in Juárez we find carried out against both women and men – as the ultimate expression of sovereignty and control within a deeply gendered symbolic universe in which men dialogue with each other through the expressive act of violence.⁸⁵ And so, Segato doesn't interpret the murders as hate crimes, as most activists do (although she doesn't dispute that

⁸⁵ Segato, Rita Laura. 2004. "Territorio, Soberanía y Crímenes de Segundo Estado: La Escritura en el Cuerpo de las Mujeres Asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez." *Série Antropologia*. Universidad de Brasília. No. 362.

misogyny exists in Juárez), but as crimes of indifference, in which women are simply the waste product of a process by which men extract the tributes they need to preserve their masculinity.

The point on which I differ with Segato is that she is interested only in the serial murders, which she believes are the work of mafia-like associations of powerful men, and calls the other cases of murdered women – including cases of domestic violence or cases like Martha Lizbeth's, where a single man, often a rather powerless one, acts alone – a “smokescreen” that obscures the real locus of impunity in Juárez. For the women's activists, however, those other cases matter if they are to continue making political claims about *feminicidio* before the State and international courts of justice, especially as the mass graves that produced so much alarm in the 1990s seemingly subsist. There's a need, too, to understand women's death in Juárez in relationship to rising numbers of women's murders along other parts of the U.S.-Mexico border, throughout Mexico, and in Central American countries such as Guatemala and Nicaragua.

I read the problem of masculinity and gendered violence as a social and analytical problem that includes all men across the social and economic spectrum. Australian sociologist Robert Connell's notion of dominant and hegemonic masculinities is useful here to understand the construction in Juárez of a very specific kind of male identity that is predicated on acts of violence.⁸⁶ It is an identity I call “hypermasculinity,” an aggrandized version masculinity that

⁸⁶ Connell, Robert. 1987. *Gender and Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

emerges in 21st-century border zones and that feeds off militaristic histories, logics and styles. Throughout Mexico, members of the country's most prominent drug syndicates have turned increasingly to violence and terror as a means of establishing their authority – witness here the spectacularly gruesome practice of beheading civilians and police, a very recent phenomenon that I date roughly to 2004, and that I think has something to do with the mass circulation of violence from the Middle East. This identity, specific to this place and time, must be constantly maintained and re-established by its authors through performative actions.

In a similar way, Patricia Albanese has explored how militarization in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s produced gender codes that celebrated enhanced male power and control and posited the hyper-masculine as a heroic form that stood outside of society.⁸⁷ Indeed, throughout the world, military culture produces social codes that are more intensely masculine and patriarchal than the norm. I argue that in Juárez, this heightened patriarchal conception of manhood serves as the measuring stick by which men involved in organized crime prove and preserve their gender status. But it *also* threatens to demasculinize men who don't have that kind of power – the poor, either legally occupied or unemployed men who have suffered a profound sense of dislocation and deterritorialization due to the occupational insecurity and changing labor structures of neoliberal economic

⁸⁷ Albanese, Patricia. 2001. "Nationalism, War, and Archaization of Gender Relations in the Balkans." *Violence Against Women*, 7(9): 999-1023.

processes. This brings us back to the question – *regardless* of his sexuality, which we don't know, why did 26-year-old José Luis Montes end up needing to victimize a young woman to compensate for his rejection from a sexual exchange that would've provided pleasure and/or economic subsistence? Perhaps, for *both* men with and without power, victimizing women serves as a way to reassert and retain a precarious male status in a deeply destabilized world.

Top Secret

His name is Edgar Hernández Flores. He is one of the men in suits who stands along the walls of the conference room, silently watching the reporters who come to a press conference in a federal building of the Justice Department in Ciudad Juárez. Via teleconference from Mexico City, María López Urbina, the special prosecutor assigned to review every case file related to the women's murders in Juárez, is presenting her first progress report with much fanfare.

The conference is supposed to be simultaneously telecast around the country, although the video connection quickly proves defective. Sixteen of us sit and stare at the fuzzy screen for a long time. "One hour and twenty-two minutes late," one person says. Some of the reporters get up from their chairs to restock on food – outside the room is a table with coffee, sandwich halves and a platter of French fries topped with sliced ham. "*¡Ay canijo, le eché mucha sugar!*" one of them exclaims after pouring a mountain of sugar into his Styrofoam cup. A man with aqua-colored cowboy boots, who colleagues call "*El Vaquero Chido*" ("The Cool Cowboy"), is bragging about the time he got caught up in a fight that broke out between the governor's body guards and municipal police. Another one claims he actually punched the governor accidentally as he tried to shield himself from a police mob. The whole scene has the feel of an unruly high school classroom, with the boys trying to steal the show. A third man tosses a piece of gum into the air while a fourth lunges for it. A photographer takes a practice shot of the television

monitor. The three of us women in the room sit quietly, watching the men as they clown around.

The press conference was scheduled for 8 a.m., but reporters trickled in as much as two hours later. No matter. The technical difficulties take a while to resolve and the event does not kick off until sometime after 10:30 p.m. It is a ceremonious ordeal, with a parade of functionaries taking the microphone before Ms. López Urbina finally gets to deliver her update on the investigation. We scribble in our notebooks as she describes her office's line of work; she says her staff is investigating both homicides and disappearances. So far they have examined the files of 37 homicides in which victims were identified and 13 in which nobody claimed the bodies. They have reviewed 55 court cases, 46 of which the state government considers closed. And they have begun building a genetic bank to help them identify victims, for which they have collected 98 samples. A total of 100 federal employees are assigned to her office in Juárez, including eight prosecutors, 27 judicial police and 25 forensics workers.

The numbers sound important, but as we print them diligently in our notebooks we are aware of how little they say. What all of us are still trying to figure out is whether López Urbina's people are going to independently investigate each of the murders or whether they are simply skimming the state's existing legal files, which were faultily assembled to begin with. Eventually we will find out it's the latter.

I am one of the last persons to leave the room, as is Edgar. He watches me from a distance and I nod in acknowledgement. On my way out, he is standing by the conference room door. He introduces himself, asks who I work for. To avoid explaining too much, I give him the name of a Texas magazine where I publish. He tells me he is one of the special prosecutor's investigators. I ask if perhaps we could talk someday, and I am very surprised when he agrees. He tries not to draw much attention to us as he recites his cell number, which I discretely jot down in my notebook.

When I call him several days later he practically whispers into the phone. He does not want anyone to know we're in communication, he says, or it could get him in trouble. In fact, he warns me that if I call him at any other time and he refers to me as "my love," it is only because someone from the office is within earshot. I tell him a little bit more about the focus of my project. He says the case of the cotton field murders is one he knows well.

I ask where it would be prudent for us to get together. He says not anywhere on the Mexican side of the border. Instead, he suggests that we meet at the Sunland Park Racetrack and Casino, just outside the El Paso city limits, on Sunday night. It's one of the few places he visits to distract himself from his work: If somebody saw us there we could say we were gambling. We agree on a time and I hang up, hoping I've hit pay dirt.

I can't say I do not feel uneasy as I head west on Interstate 10 in El Paso and then south on the dark roads that stretch past the city limits and into the small community of Sunland Park, New Mexico, a unique geographical spot where Mexico, New Mexico, and Texas meet. I had originally thought we could have a morning coffee in a busy restaurant in Juárez, which is the way I often meet sources or informants when I do not know them too well. Edgar's intentions are unclear to me. It is important to me that we are on the American side of the border – though sometimes the difference in safety in El Paso can be more perceived than real – that we drove here separately, and that the parking lot in the casino is so vast he probably will not get to see the vehicle I drive.

I find him inside, waiting for me near the entrance to the casino. He is not wearing a business jacket. We greet each other and he suggests that we take a seat in the lounge area, at a table near a stage that is empty tonight. The circumstances of the affair make it feel more like a meeting between journalist and confidential source than between anthropologist and trusted informant. I try to imagine how my journalist friends would handle this. I ask Edgar if he would like a drink – I tell him journalism ethics require me to treat rather than be treated. He orders a tequila, and thinking I can avoid calling too much attention to myself or to my gender, I ask for the same.

He seems to grow comfortable rather quickly. With the waiter refilling our drink glasses, Edgar tells me about his upbringing in a poor region in central Mexico and talks about the life of the federal *judicial*. The northern Mexican

border is considered the worst assignment, he says: the one that presents the highest possibility of death. I tell him I have been doing some reporting on drug violence in the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, which is where my family is from, but which is also home to the notorious Gulf Cartel, arguably the most brutal and blood-thirsty of Mexico's drug trafficking organizations. Edgar raises his eyebrows when I tell him this and he suggests it is not worth it. It's too dangerous, he says – you don't want to mess with those people.

Hours pass and then it seems Edgar is having a pretty good time. He tells me he has moved to Juárez alone, which probably means he has no one to talk to outside of work. I keep up with his drinking, mentally picturing my male journalism colleagues who know how to work their sources for information. Men exchange information with other men, right? It's a gender game – another masculine performance. And yet, as a female I'm faced with trying to make Edgar feel at ease while not giving off the impression that I want to befriend him, or even worse. It is a tricky situation to manage regardless, but it is especially tricky because I am a woman and he is a man.

Finally he is relaxed enough that he lets slip a comment about how disillusioned he has become with the work of López Urbina's office. Most of the people there do not care "*un centavo*," a cent about the murders, he says. He tells me that any donations individuals make for the victim's families are first ransacked by members of the prosecutor's staff, who keep the best items for themselves, including food. He goes on to describe a situation that validates what

most of us have suspected: that the creation of a special prosecutor's office is part of the necessary political theater the federal government must engage in to retain its legitimacy in the face of spiraling violence and accusations of inaction.

I sense this is the moment to remind Edgar why I came here. I proceed to ask him what he knows about the case known as the cotton field murders.

He pauses for a moment. "I've read that case file myself," he says. Then he leans in and tells me, as though he is betraying one of the office's most sensitive secrets: "Those murders were the work of two bus drivers."

The disappointment I feel is overwhelming. I am disappointed not only in Edgar (and the fact I've bought him so much tequila) – I'm especially disappointed to confirm that the President's special prosecutor's office, with its multi-million dollar budget, is yet another sham – if not by design, certainly in practice. Clearly López Urbina's staff is conducting no original investigations of any kind. They are simply rereading the state's files, which are filled with false documents and testimonies extracted through pressure or torture. By now all of Ciudad Juárez knows it was not the bus drivers who murdered Esmeralda and the seven other young women whose bodies were found in the same lot. But what happens next is even more disturbing: Without any prompting from me, Edgar offers to sell me the information. "I have access to those files," he says. "We entered them into our computers, so I can burn them all onto a disk for you." He assures me he is not doing this for personal gain, but as a way of silently protesting how the office is conducting its business.

I lie to him so that my rejection of his offer will not seem so personal or blatantly self-righteous: I tell him I'll have to ask my boss. But I also warn him that American journalism ethics will not permit me to pay for information. I also do not tell him that a friend has a copy of the files and has offered to let me use them. Out of curiosity, however, I ask him how much this transaction would cost. Well, he responds, it would have to be a serious sum, this is very sensitive information nobody has access to... I repeat that I will ask my editor, but that I expect a negative response.

I have little energy or interest in talking left, and with all the tequila I've consumed, nothing seems more attractive right now than the thought of my bed. I ask for the check and close a \$70 tab. Edgar still wants to show me his brand-new sports car, which he says is parked right in front of the casino in the valet section. With the valet attendants standing nearby, I watch from a distance as Edgar walks up to the metallic-green vehicle, opens a door and points to the flashy dashboard like an excited boy. I nod and wave goodbye as he climbs into the car – his reward for being a good government soldier – and wait until he has disappeared from the parking lot before I walk off to find my Jeep Liberty. Heading back into the city on Interstate 10, I review the night's events and now see the humor in them. I laugh out loud – more at myself, I think, than at anyone or anything else.

Exhumation

Esmeralda's body was scheduled to be exhumed at 8:30 a.m. on a Tuesday morning. I arrived twenty minutes late, still beating the state government's delegation. The cemetery stretched in every direction: a sea of dust punctuated by white rocks and wooden crosses painted in every color. The forensic anthropologist, a small, light-skinned woman who spoke in an Argentine sing-song and seemed to be in her late twenties or early thirties, was present with another anthropologist, a young man from Juárez around her same age. Irma, Juan, Ceci and Juanis were all there, along with two women who had come to offer moral support. Juan was particularly attentive. He walked to and from a white minivan Irma had purchased just a few days before, carrying napkins and bottles of alcohol and prescription medications in case Irma should react poorly to the sight of her daughter's coffin.

The idea of exhuming Esmeralda's remains had come from the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, a nongovernmental organization that uses forensic anthropology and archaeology to help investigate human rights violations across the world. The team was established in 1984 to help investigate the disappearance of some 10,000 people under military rule in Argentina. There – and later in other countries that had been torn by violence in South and Central America, Africa, Asia, and Europe – the anthropologists dug for remains and helped families claim the bodies of their loved ones in order to give them a proper burial. When the team learned of the women's murders in Juárez and found out that some of the victim's

mothers had never fully identified their daughters' remains, they offered to exhume the bodies in order to provide scientific confirmation. Work agreements required them to collaborate with the Chihuahua state government, however. Although Irma's family was almost certain the body they had buried in 2001 belonged to Esmeralda, Irma herself had always had a nagging doubt and thought the Argentine's work might provide some much-needed closure.⁸⁸

The government workers arrived at a quarter past nine. There were eight altogether, including a criminologist, a lawyer from the attorney general's office, and a physician from the Health Department. They addressed Irma and her family in the familiar, using the pronoun "*tu*"; Irma's family always responded respectfully, using the form "*usted*." The Argentine anthropologist snapped photos of Esmeralda's white marble tombstone and measured it with a yardstick. She taped a white sheet of paper labeling the grave with Esmeralda's name, and then below it, an orange-colored arrow pointing to the left. The tools of science. She snapped another photo. The procedure was greatly more deliberate and thorough than anything the government had done when Esmeralda's body had been recovered four years earlier.

Three men emerged at a distance, two of them carrying shovels and the third, a pick over his shoulder. The youngest man looked to be in his twenties; the

⁸⁸ Because the body presumed to be Esmeralda's had begun decomposing and had no flesh above the neckline, her family was unable to verify its identity, although they recognized her clothing. DNA test results provided by the state government after Esmeralda's burial had also been inconclusive.

second was somewhere in his forties, and the third, in his sixties. The first two wore baseball caps and the oldest, a cheap cowboy hat made of white straw. One of the men hobbled as he walked – polio perhaps – while another’s hand shook as he held a cigarette: Parkinson’s. They were here on government orders to dig Esmeralda from her grave.

The Argentine, who had dressed for the occasion in hiking attire, had not missed anything: measuring tools, a bucket, brushes, dust pans, safety goggles, gloves, hand picks, facial masks, sheets of plastic in all sizes. She handed each of the men a mask and a pairs of orange suede gloves. They stuffed the gloves into their back pockets and strung the masks above their heads, over their baseball caps.

Using the pick they’d brought and two long wooden boards they found nearby, they lifted Esmeralda’s tombstone and tried to drag it to the side. They grunted as they struggled with the dense mass of rock. After some time, the tombstone was finally moved out of the way, and the men stopped to catch their breath and panted. The Argentine emerged with water in small Styrofoam cups. I turned to look at Irma, who was already beginning to tear up.

As the men finally broke the ground with their shovels, Irma walked to a tombstone nearby and sat on top of it. I heard her make whimpering noises. Then, as the digging proceeded, the whimpers turned into deep moans, and then into sobs. “Why do I have to go back to the same thing?” she cried, her voice a mix of anger, sadness and desperation. Juan hugged her heaving body, and the two

women who had come to support Irma rushed over to comfort her. “If they had done everything properly from the start, I wouldn’t be having to go through this!” Irma yelled. Juanis whispered to me, “It’s as if Esmeralda had died again.” *Como si acabara de morir.*

The sun quickly transformed the brisk morning into what felt like a brick oven. The sun bleached everything in sight and bored into our backs. The anthropologist’s assistant pulled out a fold-up tarp and stretched it out over metal legs so that it shielded Irma and her family. The digging was hard labor: The men threw out shovelfuls of dirt that flew everywhere. The Argentine put on her mask. As the men worked their way further into the ground, the earth turned darker, and the back of their shirts grew sopping wet. Their brown skin glistened with sweat. They spat. Finally they accepted the anthropologist’s offer of goggles and slipped them over their eyes, covering their mouths with the masks. They were forced to lift their shovels higher, harder. Water was passed around.

After several hours, the diggers detected metal and they called the anthropologist to come over. She slipped on her mask and handed them brushes to clean off the top of the casket. Their sweeping revealed a bright pink coffin – the same shade as the eight wooden crosses activists had planted in the cotton field where the bodies were found. It was trimmed in white and silver.

The anthropologist handed one of the diggers a computer-printed label and asked him to place it on top of the coffin, along with the neon-orange plastic arrow. She was trying to keep the mood light. “That’s it, super assistant!” she said

playfully. She snapped more photos with her black digital camera, as did the officials who had come from the attorney general's office. Then she made her way to where Irma was sitting and asked her if she wanted to see. Irma nodded. Slowly, she unfolded herself from the tombstone and staggered over to what was now a gaping hole in the ground.

For a moment she stood silently near the edge, looking into the abyss. Juan and Juanis held her up from either side. Irma covered her mouth with a tissue and stared through tears. Suddenly, her knees buckled, she fell limp, and her eyes rolled toward the sky.

Juan embraced her and tried to drag her back under the tarp, the women following close behind. They sat Irma down and began calling to her. "*Irma! Irma! Listen to us!*" Irma's mouth was agape as she gasped for air. Her eyelids were closed. She let out several slow, deep groans as her head fell forward and back. The women stretched her arms out and rubbed them fast with alcohol. They dampened her neck and her back. Eight hands tried to bring Irma back to life. "Irma! Irma! Talk to us! Cry, scream – do what you have to do! You have other children, Irma. *Irma!*"

Irma's head fell into Juan's arms. Finally, we heard her begin to weep. We breathed a collective sigh of relief. Her cries pierced the quiet afternoon and sent chills running down my spine. "Esmeralda!" she screamed. "Why? Why, my God? Why did you take her from me? I had asked you to take care of her for me. Where were you when she was killed? Where?"

"He was with her, Irma," one of the women said, gently but firmly.

"No!" Irma insisted. "Why did they do this to her? I want to be with her! I want to see her! My Esmeralda, my little girl, my little girl! I love you so much. You and I were such special friends."

I turned to look for Cecilia. She was standing off to the side, leaning alone against one of the tarp's posts. She stared into the distance, silently heartbroken, her face a mess of tears. I remembered what she'd once told me about loving Esmeralda like a daughter. It occurred to me that all this time Irma had thought Cecilia was cold with her, Cecilia had in fact been grieving, too.

"You have your other daughters here," one of the women said to Irma.

"But she was very special," Irma replied, sobbing.

The three men yanked the metal box from the grave and the bright pink of its surface pierced the horizon. They handed it to the government's workers, who had readied to whisk it away.

"Esmeralda! Esmeralda!" Irma cried as they walked off with the box.

"Don't take her! I want to go with you. I want to be with her. They're going to take her away again."

The men didn't turn once to see her. They carried the coffin to the white-and-green official state camper truck that was parked nearby. They opened a side door and tried several times until they were able to fit the box inside. Irma's cries rang through the desert. Her companions gathered around her and forced her to

walk toward her minivan. The officials loaded their cars and the government caravan moved on to another section of the cemetery, to unearth another girl.

Irma's family also drove off, leaving behind a heavy silence. I felt faint. Walking over to the gaping hole in the ground, it was hard to fathom that the young woman who I had struggled to know for years, who I had never tired of asking about, had been buried in this deep place. I had never seen her tombstone until now. Alone in the desert, I finally allowed my tears to fall.

*Esmeralda Herrera Monreal
01/09/1986 to 10/29/2001
Remembered by your parents and brothers and sisters
Queen of the heavens, more pure than the light
Do not forget me as you stand before Jesus
I will never forget you, my joy and my fate will always be
To love you, precious creature*

Afterword:

Death Returns

On a bitter-cold winter morning, as the city began coming to life and people appeared at bus stops swaddled in jackets and scarves, I stood outside the sprawling compound of the 20th Cavalry Regiment in Ciudad Juárez. I had come to witness a protest prompted by the disappearance of a 19-year-old university student named Jaime Alejandro Irigoyen. Two nights before, as Jaime's family readied for bed in a working-class neighborhood just on the other side of the border from El Paso, a group of men dressed in military clothes had barged into their home and taken Jaime with them by force. "They were soldiers," Jaime's father, Alejandro Irigoyen, assured me as family members and members of the media arrived. "I knew this because of their clothing, because of their accent, because of their height." Either the men were picking up young males at random, or they had mistaken Jaime for someone else, it seemed. They had not known who he was; one of the men had looked around the room and, finding nobody but Jaime, his parents, and Jaime's 11-year-old brother, had ordered the others: "Take that one, the one with the glasses." It had all happened so fast, within minutes: They had knocked on the door, Jaime's mother had opened, and a few moments later her older son was gone. As he spoke outside the military base, Jaime's father referred to him as "*mi hijo el desaparecido*" – my son the disappeared.

It was January 14, 2009, precisely five years after I had moved to the El Paso/Juárez region to do my fieldwork. I was back because it seemed from the reading the papers each day that Juárez was in the throes of self-destruction. The previous year had been the bloodiest in history: Between 1,600 and 1,650 people

were killed in 2008 (depending on who you ask and how you tally the numbers), an average of between four to five victims a day in a city of roughly two million people. By comparison, the highest number of murders ever seen before that was in 2007, when 316 people were killed.⁸⁹ I had wanted to spend the first fifteen days of the year in the city in hopes of glimpsing what had changed – how it was that the number of homicides had multiplied five times from just one year to the next. Partly I was concerned that the hard-earned attention on the problem of the women's murders had faded as people struggled to adjust to the latest explosion of violence, which the Mexican government and the media attributed to a “war” between drug cartels that was also playing out in other parts of the country. Nearly one-third of the drug-related murders in Mexico in 2008 had happened in Juárez, and of the victims, 86 had been women, a record number. Yet women's activists did not know what to make of the fact that many of them had been victimized in ways similar to the men (presumably because they too were involved in the business) or because they were bystanders when a shooting spree had occurred. They felt their strategy of public protest had become less effective in the face of generalized chaos and death, and they admitted to being scared like the rest of the city.⁹⁰

Protest was the only thing Jaime's family could think to do at this point. They had spent the entire previous day shuttling back and forth between local,

⁸⁹ “Marca febrero record de homicidios.” *El Diario*. Mar. 1, 2009.

⁹⁰ “Callan ONG's ante crímenes de mujeres.” *El Diario*. Dec. 9, 2008.

state and federal government offices, searching for their son and seeking explanations of his abduction. Everyone told them to inquire somewhere else. Then they sought counsel from an acquaintance who had survived a similar nightmare a few months before. The woman's son had been whisked away by soldiers for stepping in as they arrested a young man who had just purchased a used car from him, falsely accusing him of possessing drugs. For days, military commanders in Juárez had denied having him, but the victim's relatives had sought attention from the media and staged televised protests in front of the Regiment's base until he was released. By then, though, he had been tortured for days, and he immediately fled the city in terror.

So when Jaime's family hoped for the best, it was that he was inside the camp being tortured, and not already another death statistic.

Dozens of similar complaints had been filed with the Chihuahua Human Rights Commission (CHRC) in Juárez. President Felipe Calderón had dispatched 2,500 troops to Juárez as part of a national effort to fight the cartels militarily, but the violence had only grown worse. The official explanation for this was that members of the cartels felt their organizations weakening and were fighting back through more bloodshed. But in Juárez, a disturbing pattern was emerging and few had noticed it. After the arrival of the military in March 2003, the number of murders had shot up and the face of the victims had begun to change. Where before most of the victims had fit the profile typically associated with organized crime – local or state police and investigators and men between the ages of twenty

and thirty, who dressed well and drove late-model cars – now the victims included droves of younger men who were poor and in some cases had a background of drug use or petty crime. The number of disappearances reported to the CHRC had also jumped, and people like Gustavo de la Rosa Hickerson, the lawyer who directed the human rights office, were beginning to think that the military itself was systematically snatching men from low-income neighborhoods and submitting them to days of torture in order to gather intelligence about the local drug market. Some of the young men were then consigned to the state courts with fabricated charges of drug possession, while others were released and later mysteriously ended up dead.

Jaime cut a different figure than most of the young men who had been detained, which made him a compelling story to the press. He was a handsome baseball player and a third-year law student at the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez. The son of maquiladora workers who had climbed the factory ranks and nabbed supervisory jobs, he was the kind of person who made *juarenses* believe that their version of the American Dream did in fact exist: a poor kid who had managed to keep out of trouble and stay in school and would become a professional. Like many of the female murder victims before, he was the child who was going to lift his family into a different social class. He was a role model for his younger brother, who exercised with him and followed him to his baseball practices. His parents provided him with an allowance and a car, so he didn't have a need to get involved in shady dealings. Just to be sure, Jaime's father had

inspected his son's wallet after he was abducted, but had found only the cash his parents had given him.

By now, a dozen family members and friends of Jaime's had formed a row across the street from the military camp and were waving neon-colored posters with handwritten messages at passing cars.

"We want Jaime back!"

"We demand justice."

"Jaime is just a student, not a delinquent."

"Return Jaime safely!"

"Jaime is a baseball player and a student at the UACJ."

A young man in running pants and a black jacket stood quietly, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. His blue poster read "UACJ Indians." Jaime had been expected to play in a regional baseball tournament the following month. "That was his dream," his father, a reserved man with thinning, graying hair and glasses, told me. "Or," he said correcting himself, "that is his dream." His throat closed as he described all the effort Jaime had been putting into training. "*Le ha estado poniendo muchas ganas,*" he said.

Jaime's mother and grandmother stood on the median, with cars passing them on either side. In front of them, three military guards guarded the entrance to the camp with assault rifles. Jaime's grandmother screamed, "Give him back to me! I know you have him. For the love of God, give me back my boy! I ask you, I beg you. Touch your heart, touch your heart. My boy is not a delinquent, he is not

a delinquent. For the love of God!” I had arrived at 7 a.m., and in the rush to get there had forgotten my gloves, so that my fingers were numb as I scribbled in my notebook. Our shoes quickly became covered in dust. The sun was bright, but I could still see the moon looming above the corroding observatory of the state prison next door. Trucks rumbled by, setting off car alarms. A few passers-by honked. A green Suburban slowed, its passengers snapping pictures. Military transport and pickup trucks rolled out of the camp, seven or eight soldiers squeezed onto a bed and peering at us from behind ski masks. I asked Jaime’s father what his son had been wearing the night he was taken from his home and he stared at the ground as he tried to pin down the facts: Long shorts, he said, since he was getting ready for bed. But the trauma was jogging his memory. Were they black and red, or red and white? He did remember a stripe running down the side.

About ninety minutes into the protest, I saw that Jaime’s mother and grandmother were crossing the street heading back to where the rest of us were standing. Their faces were twisted with fear, and Jaime’s mother cried loudly. Their relatives rushed to surround them. Jaime’s mother managed to tell us that one of the television reporters at the protest had just received a call from his editor, who notified him that a male body had just been found in another part of the city. The suspense was too much for the family members to bear – the possibility that it could be Jaime’s was devastating.

I heard my cell phone ring. It was my friend Julián, calling to be sure I was safe. I told him where I was and what had transpired, and he said indeed, he had

just seen an image of the body on the morning news. I asked him what it looked like, my chest flooding with dread. “It seemed like someone who was young and fit,” Julián said. When I asked him about clothing, he replied that it was someone in shorts. A son-in-law was dispatched to the scene of the crime to see if he could make out the dead man’s identity. About ten photographers, television producers and newspaper reporters were now gathered, and across the street an army spokesman emerged from the compound to offer an official statement. He said the military was not holding Jaime Alejandro and had not conducted any operations in his neighborhood the previous nights. He warned Juárez residents to beware of criminals who tried to pass off as soldiers – a line that had been used when other families had accused the army of abuse and that I found suspicious. A larger group of soldiers in desert camouflage dress were now gathered in front of the compound, and two of them crossed the street to where we were standing and snapped photos of each of us with their digital cameras. We recognized their actions as an intimidation tactic, and although I was intimidated I lifted my own camera and snapped back.

The following hours were dreadful. The son-in-law returned with little to report; he said the police had cordoned off the body and hadn’t allowed him close enough to make out its features. He did see that the eyes had been covered with duct tape, and he said it appeared the victim had received a *tiro de gracia* – a shot delivered to the back of the head to ensure the finishing of the job. “This wait is

terrible, *mamá*,” Jaime’s mother told his grandmother, shaking her head. Her lips were white. “It’s like dying in life.”

A truck pulled up then and Jaime’s younger brother and a 14-year-old cousin climbed out with tears streaming down their faces. The boy walked up to his father and buried his face in his chest. The young woman, who was wearing lime-green pants and a pink jacket and whose name was Johana, came over to where I was standing with two of Jaime’s aunts. “It’s him, it’s him!” she cried. She described how she and José Eduardo had seen the image of the body on television and José had recognized it as his older brother. “We already heard about it, but it’s not him,” her aunt Cecilia insisted. She thrust her finger at the military compound. “That’s where they have him and that’s where he’s going to come out of.” But Johana shook her head inconsolably. She stared at the soldiers in front of us and seethed with anger. “I wish I could throw a bomb at them and kill them!” she said. “It’s infuriating, infuriating not to be able to do anything. I wish I could scream at them, but we know that they’re the ones in charge. I *need* for this to be over, for them to take the soldiers away from here. Because it was them, it was them, it was them. I know it was them.”

About an hour later we were able to confirm that indeed, Jaime Alejandro was dead. One of the television reporters was able to show his parents an image of the body on his Sony Handycam recorder. Jaime’s father clutched his chest; his mother’s knees buckled. It was chilling to watch.

Later that afternoon, after tracking down the mother whose son had been tortured by soldiers months before and who had since fled the city, I stopped by Jaime's home to offer my condolences to his parents. They sat in their dining room surrounded by family, their eyes red and sad, having cried all they could that day. They had already visited the morgue and identified their son's remains. As I left their home and as I drove out of Juárez over the Bridge of the Americas the following morning, I could not stop comparing the experiences of the families of the young women whose funerals I had once attended with what I had witnessed on this visit. It was as though the same social drama were repeating itself: the abduction of a child, the disinterest and inaction of government officials, the agony of waiting for news, the horror of identifying the badly mutilated body, the ensuing state of long-term grief and the lack of any kind of resolution. Only this time, the victims are male, seemingly complicating the questions we had posed about gender.

In light of the arguments I have presented in this manuscript, however, I see a direct relationship between the women's murders and the current state of military violence in Ciudad Juárez. The performance of a violent hypermasculinity, the struggles to control territory and space, the exertion of an oblique form of power that is perpetuated by but does not answer to the State (will we ever know for certain if the people who murdered Jaime were soldiers or men imitating the actions of soldiers?) – all of these factors reappear in the more recent cases of male victimization. Surely there are variations by group, so that a gender

analysis is more critical than ever. And while the persistence of these social problems – indeed, their expression in ever-more-terrifying manifestations – overwhelms and feeds our growing sense of hopelessness, as a researcher I am encouraged by the hope of making theoretical links that might further illuminate the complicated dynamics of 21st century border violence. Our research agendas remain full.

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