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Publication Date

2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Conditions of (Im)possibility: Necropolitics, Neoliberalism, and the Cultural Politics of
Death in Contemporary Chicana/o Film and Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction for the requirements of the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Edward A. Avila

Committee in charge:

Professor Rosaura Sánchez, Chair
Professor Yen Le Espiritu
Professor David G. Gutiérrez
Professor Lisa Lowe
Professor Shelley Streeby

2012

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The Dissertation of Edward A. Avila is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

Para mis padres, Dolores Ruiz y Vicente Daniel Avila.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge my committee members for all of their support, guidance, and inspiration. Thank you to Yen Le Espiritu for her tireless guidance and support, both academically and otherwise. Your seminar on “War, Race, and Violence” was pivotal towards establishing the theoretical foundation of this dissertation. Discussions with you on such theoretical topics like biopolitics, necropolitics, states of exception, and bare life have had a profound impact on my intellectual development. Thank you to David Gutiérrez for offering numerous hours discussing issues related to the history of the U.S. Southwest, U.S-Mexico immigration history and policy, and the politics of ethnicity in the U.S. I will always cherish our discussions about academia, history, and music. Mil gracias. To Shelley Streeby, I am grateful for all your intellectual guidance in helping me develop a greater understanding of American Studies and more profound respect for archival research. The many hours spent attending your seminars and the early guidance and support you offered me during the formation of this dissertation have left an indelible mark on my current research. Many thanks to Lisa Lowe for making the literary theory sequence of my graduate studies so challenging and enjoyable. I am grateful for our discussions on bio/necropolitics and immigration and literature. I would especially like to thank Rosaura Sánchez for her many years of tireless mentoring and unwavering support. This dissertation would not have been possible without your intellectual guidance, emotional support, and steadfast patience. Thank you for teaching me the importance of responsible scholarship, pedagogy, and activism. I especially want to thank you for encouraging me to stay the course during the most challenging years of my graduate studies. My sincerest gratitude goes to you for

encouraging me to take risks with my research and for providing me with a model of what it means to be a first-rate scholar and teacher of Chicana/o and Latina/o scholarship.

I would like to thank the staff at the Literature Department—Kristen Carnohan, Thom Hill, Nancy Daly, Dawn Blessman, and Ana Minvielle—for their tireless support and for helping me successfully navigate the administrative complexities of graduate school.

A very warm thank you to my wonderful family for always supporting me and giving me inspiration for finishing this research project. To my best friend and life-long partner, Delia, for your unwavering support and confidence in me and for holding me up during the entirety of my graduate studies. To my two beautiful and inspiring children—Maya and Eliana—for always reminding me of what is really important in life and why teaching comes with the upmost care and responsibility.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Conditions of (Im)possibility: Necropower and the Cultural Politics of Death in
Contemporary Chicana/o Literature and Film

by

Edward A. Avila

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Rosaura Sánchez, Chair

This dissertation argues that the selected literary and filmic texts examined in this study offer critical reconfigurations of the intersecting processes of neoliberal rationalities and the necropolitical order of power along the U.S.-Mexico border. Moreover, the texts examined in this dissertation refocus our attention on critical

representations of social abandonment, denationalization, and the production of disposable life under contemporary neoliberal capitalism along the border region.

Chapter 1, “The Maquila Complex: Necropolitical Landscapes and the Cartographies of Abandonment,” examines the ways in which the film documentaries *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006) and *Señorita Extraviada: Missing Young Women* (2001) and the novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) critically articulate and engage with cultural narratives and images of feminicide and anti-female terror. This chapter focuses on the ways in which these seemingly two different film documentaries (re)configure the “conditions of possibility” underwriting various forms of social and political abandonment, exceptionality, and denationalization. Chapter 2, “Reification, Disposability, and Resistance,” continues looking at these three same texts in order to investigate the ways in which these distinct genres of Chicana/o cultural production articulate and reconfigure feminicide in relation to social reification, commodity fetishism, and cultural narratives of disposability. This chapter attempts to look at these two texts primarily through the Marxist concept of reification in order draw attention to the ways in which these texts imaginatively represent violence against women beyond immediate circumstances and towards a complex, contradictory narrative that captures the historicized gender, racial, and class dimensions of violence. Chapter 3, “What ‘We’ Do Abroad: Transnational Adoption and Liberal Internationalism under Contemporary Neoliberalism at the Borderlands,” engages with the cultural representations of the neoliberal (b)order along the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. Linking Foucauldian analyses of neoliberal governmentality with critiques of liberal internationalism and transnational adoption, this chapter investigates the ways in which the novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez*

Murders and the film *Bordertown* (2008) configure neoliberal rationalities embedded in the technologies of governing that produce discourses of blame, mismanaged life, and failed motherhood in relation to U.S. narratives of child rescue and humanitarian interventionism.

Introduction

This dissertation offers a critique of Chicana and Chicano cultural representations of feminicide, anti-female terror, and other forms of violence against racialized, poor women along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands from a perspective that considers neoliberal rationalities and necropolitics. Moreover, this dissertation argues that the selected literary and filmic texts examined in this study refocus our attention on critical representations of political abandonment, denationalization, and social deprivation under late-capitalism along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The visual and literary representations examined in this study offer alternative reconfigurations of the intersecting processes of neoliberal socio-political rationalities and the emerging necropolitical order of power along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

While recent studies on neoliberal economic policy provide insightful and instructive frames of analysis toward understanding the complex dialectical relationship between global economic shifts and local social transformations, a growing body of work analyzing the social and political *rationalities* of neoliberalism offers new ways of thinking about sovereignty, subjectivity, and racialized, gendered relations of power under contemporary global capitalism. In addition to this emerging field of scholarly work on neoliberal rationalities, recent literature on biopolitics, necropolitics, and exceptionality likewise offers critical perspectives from which to examine contemporary forms of discipline and surveillance underwriting various forms of violence against racialized, gendered, segments of the population along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. As Achille Mbembe reminds us, necropolitics involves “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” in which the order of power invested in the fostering of life

and the care of the bio-political community finds its corollary in the reproduction of relations of enmity, impunity and the right to kill and/or expose to death.

Socio-Historical Context

From the late nineteenth century to the mid-1920s, the U.S.-Mexico border region emerged as a temporary residence for thousands of Mexican male laborers working the smelters and railroads. While Ciudad Juárez was predominantly characterized by an agricultural economy prior to the 1880s, the infusion of large U.S. investment in northern Mexico transformed the socio-economic landscape of the region. Reconfiguring its imperial expansionist policies along the U.S.-Mexico border, the United States, according to historians Gilbert González and Raúl Fernández, “began to engage new mechanisms of empire in the late 1870s, when it became the senior partner in an alliance with the local Mexican elite personified in the figure of dictator Porfirio Díaz” (quoted in Lugo, 31). With large U.S. capital backing the construction of railroads along Mexico’s northern region, subsequent investments in mining, cattle farming, and agricultural production quickly emerged (31).

In *A Century of Chicano History*, Gilbert G. González and Raúl A. Fernández draw historical connections between nineteenth century modes of U.S. economic expansionism and current modes of U.S. neo-imperialism under contemporary neoliberalism. In discussing the early manifestations of the transnational mode of economic domination, González and Fernández write,

Following a period of political instability, military strongman Porfirio Díaz took over Mexico’s government in 1876. Díaz inaugurated the period of economic liberalism—forerunner of the current NAFTA-style neoliberalism—by selling railroad concessions to large U.S. railroad companies in the northern states. Within three years after Díaz came to

power, concession to the United States provided for the construction of five railroads in Mexico—some twenty-five hundred miles. . . . These lines went from south to north and provided a route to the interior of Mexico from which mineral ore and agricultural products were transported to the United States. (36-37)

In their discussion of railroad development, the authors draw attention to the social transformations emerging from this form of economic modernization. More specifically, they draw attention to two related processes—the direct involvement of local elites with foreign capital and the relationship between modernization and dispossession.¹

In the early 1940s, U.S. interests in acquiring Mexican labor would redefine U.S.-Mexican political and economic relations. The acquisition of Mexican male labor to work the agricultural fields of the U.S. southwest would have a lasting impact not only on U.S.-Mexico economic relations, but would also profoundly shape governmental and public discourse on immigration, citizenship, and border enforcement. During World War II, the United States faced growing shortages in food and fiber production. According to David Gutiérrez, shortly after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Selective Service Act in September 1940, southwestern growers began to complain of severe labor shortages (*Walls and Mirrors*, 133). With the U.S. mobilized for war in Western Europe and the Pacific, coupled with a significant shortage of agricultural labor along the U.S. southwest, a bi-national agreement between Mexico and the U.S. resulted in the 1942 Bracero Program that permitted U.S. growers to legally contract Mexican laborers in order to maintain U.S. agricultural productivity during the war.

¹ In their discussion of the ramifications of modernization upon peasant communities, Gonzalez and Fernandez write: “Evidence shows that the economic spur of the railroad promoted land expropriation laws, under the aegis of liberal land reform, and effected the legalized transfer of free peasant village holdings to nearby haciendas” (39).

From the early 1960s through the 1970s, many Latin American countries experienced severe stagnation as import-substitution industrialization (ISI) models of economic growth ran into serious problems during a period of intensifying global capitalism. In general, many Latin American firms continually relied on imported capital goods from the United States, Western Europe, and Japan as ISI strategies increasingly failed to supply manufactures with sufficient, up-to-date capital goods. Moreover, as Latin American principle exports underwent steady declines in purchasing power in the global market, domestic demand for manufactured products decreased significantly. Because Latin American industry had adopted capital-intensive technology typical of advanced industrial economies, many firms could create only a limited number of jobs for workers (Skidmore 56-57).² Under ISI stagnation, political and economic elites increasingly turned toward neoliberal economic policies and away from government sanctioned tariffs and barriers designed to protect domestic producers while stimulating domestic demand of locally or regionally produced goods and services. Arguably, since the mid-1960s, and certainly since the early 1970s, transnational corporations operating in manufacturing and agriculture have played a significant role in the process of standardization of production techniques and global consumption patterns. In order to achieve optimal conditions favorable to capital investment, particularly from foreign capital, many Latin American governments often implemented coercive social policies in order to either weaken or dismantle the collective power of the working class (of which Pinochet's socio-economic

² According to historian Thomas E. Skidmore, between 1970 and 1980, Latin American external debt increased substantially from \$27 billion to \$231 billion. By 1990, Latin American external debt skyrocketed to an alarming \$417.5 billion. While many Latin American countries accepted the conditions of IMF-sponsored debt relief programs, many of the loans were allocated to cover current interest payments (59). *Modern Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

transformation of Chile represents one of several modalities of neoliberalization in Latin America during the 1970s).

According to Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964 resulted in approximately 200,000 unemployed braceros. In order to address the high unemployment rate of Mexican workers and put into productive capacity this large reserve army of labor, the Mexican government implemented the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) in 1965, which included Maquiladora export processing (Lugo 70). The implementation of BIP along Mexico's northern border stimulated northward migrations from Mexico's southern and interior regions. In discussing the material conditions of possibility for the emergence of the BIP and its socio-economic impact on the border region, Gutiérrez writes,

The BIP, which soon became known popularly as the maquiladora program, was established in 1965 in the aftermath of the defunct Bracero Program to encourage economic growth and employment in the immediate U.S.-Mexico border region by permitting the establishment of various kinds of assembly plants built and operated by foreign firms. Mexico hoped to attract investment and increase employment opportunities by allowing foreign-owned companies to take advantage of lower wages as well as relaxed labor, safety, and environmental standards. (64)

While the Mexican government lauded the maquiladora industry as a successful model of economic development, a number of critics have pointed out the sociological and ecological disruptions associated with the maquiladora model. Moreover, as Gutiérrez points out, the rapid development of the maquiladora industry stimulated a two-fold trend that would have a significant impact upon migratory and relocation patterns. "The proliferation of maquiladora industries," he notes, "has not only added to the skyrocketing population of Mexico's northern tier states, but has also contributed to the

uprooting of women and men from traditional occupations and attachment to the land” (65). It should be noted that throughout the 1980s, economic growth in Latin America relied heavily on external borrowing as more countries faced difficulty balancing budgets and paying off loans. Moreover, the effects of capital penetration in Latin America are especially devastating for peasant and indigenous societies engaged in modes of production oriented toward subsistence and full employment rather than the maximization of output and profit. With the development of off-shore manufacturing and the concomitant destruction of peasant communities via capitalization and enclosure, large populations faced limited means of subsistence, resulting in regional and long distance migrations.

The shift in the gender dimension of labor constitutes one of the more significant transformations associated with the maquiladora model. In Ciudad Juárez alone, women have constituted the majority of the population since the implementation of the BIP. According to the *Desarrollo Económico de Ciudad Juárez*, 712,355 women resided in Juarez compared to 574,399 males (Lugo 72). “As of 1997,” writes Lugo, “there were seventeen industrial parks, where 201,105 employees were working in approximately 278 assembly plants (DECJ 1999)” (72).

It was during the early 1980s, however, when multinational corporations established their presence along the U.S.-Mexico border. The devaluation of the Mexican peso yielded lower wages for workers and, therefore, a cheaper and more flexible labor force for multinationals. By the 1990s, approximately 300 plants had been established in Ciudad Juárez. Yet, as Lugo points out, the maquiladora industry, particularly in the context of the peso devaluation, altered its hiring practices as both women and men,

younger or older, or anyone in need of job found employment in the plants. “With the subsequent multiple devaluations since the 1980s and the implementation of NAFTA since 1994,” writes Lugo, “these corporations were experiencing different unending heights of surplus value, which . . . emanated not just from the plight of working-class women, but also from that of working-class men” (75). Labor exploitation in the maquiladoras emerges as a complex and often violent relationship between managers and assembly-line workers, between upper management and floor supervisors articulated undoubtedly through gendered relations of power between men and women. Yet, due to the “particular articulation of culture and capitalism in Ciudad Juárez,” Lugo points out, “multinational corporations manipulated not only vulnerable working-class women, but whoever was accessible and available for production when needed, be they women, men, or children, through a process that is locally and historically determined” (82). Various forms of social inequity and violent labor practices emerged from a complex social arrangement conditioned largely by the mutually determining forces of global capital and local racialized and gendered relations of power. Concrete state and capital efforts to control local workers and surrounding communities constitute one of the more crucial dimensions of the intersecting forces of neoliberal governmentality and the emerging necropolitical order of power along the U.S.-Mexico border region. It is to the intersection of neoliberal governmentality and the emerging necropolitical order of power to which we now turn.

Critical Literature and Methodology

In examining Chicana/o literary and visual representations of femicide and anti-female terror along the U.S.-Mexico border region, this study draws from Rosa Linda

Fregoso's critique of the interpretive discourses of femicide and disappearance, in particular two dominant discourses which we may refer to as "discourses of morality" and "discourses of globalization." While the former discourse imposes a moral interpretation that blames the victims for their deaths due to the apparent violation of non-traditional, patriarchal gender forms of conduct and behavior, the latter constitutes a unifying trope for explaining the brutal murders that, as Fregoso reminds us, represents a gross conflation of exploited gendered bodies with their extermination. And while Fregoso's insightful critique of these two dominant narratives offers an approach that brings into critical focus the ways in which these dominant discourses rehearse and reinscribe the very structure of power undergirding violence against women, I fear that such an approach potentially underestimates the extent to which the intersecting forces of economic globalization and state sovereignty reproduce in complex ways the conditions of possibility of violence against mostly racialized, poor women along the U.S.-Mexico border region. Therefore, this study pays critical attention to the ways in which Chicana/o literature and film articulate and reconfigure the intersection of neoliberal governmentality and necropolitics in the context of femicide and violence against women. As such, this study takes an interdisciplinary approach that bridges analyses of necropolitics with recent literature on neoliberal governmentality and the production of bare life and exceptionality.

Drawing from the work of Fregoso and Giorgio Agamben, we begin with the premise that the necropolitical order of power along the U.S.-Mexico border region exhibits two related processes of sovereign power: the socio-political rationalities of neoliberalism and the production of bare life and social and political abandonment. We must note,

however, that the presence of the maquiladora industry neither signifies a form of martial law or colonial war from which a state of exception is declared by the sovereign.

Agamben's genealogy of the camp turns to the Nazi *Lager* as a conceptual paradigm from which to understand the ways in which camp and the state of exception inhere, however latent, in modern democracies.³ In the context of the U.S. and Britain, the state of exception is commonly referred to as "martial law" or "emergency powers of the state" (Agamben 4). While these terms come close to approximating the state of exception in the contemporary moment, they, nonetheless, fall short of adequately defining the proper structure of the state of exception. The state of exception, according to Agamben, "is not a special law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept" (4). It is precisely the ways in which the texts articulate this suspension of the political and juridical order that deserve our attention. The suspension of the political and juridical order as exemplified in the governing technology of impunity, for example, speaks of the ways in which social and political abandonment not only emerge through state declarations or pronouncements of the suspension of constitutional rights and protections, but rather how it functions and operates *in absentia*, that is through state inaction, incapacity, or indifference in securing the rights and protection of all persons residing and working along the U.S.-Mexico border region. It is through these articulations of social and political abandonment that the texts examined here engage with the necropolitical order of power underwriting femicide and violence against women from both sides of the border.

³ The Nazi *Lager* constitutes that spatial state of emergency where the juridical basis for confinement and the suspension of constitutional rights are articulated through the concept of *Schutzhaft* ("protective custody").

In understanding how the production of bare life emerges in the context of social and political abandonment, in what I take to be a permutation of the state of exception, we must briefly touch upon the concept of bare life. Agamben formulates three relational categories of life: *zoe*, *bios*, and bare/naked life. *Zoe* denotes natural or biological life. It constitutes the “simple fact of living common to all living beings,” including “animals [and] humans” (*Homo Sacer*, 3). *Bios* denotes political life or a politically qualified life. It is, according to Agamben, “the form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or group” (3). Naked life, on the other hand, signifies politicized *zoe* captured in the ancient Roman juridical figure *homo sacer*, a life that cannot be (or is not worthy of being) sacrificed but killed with impunity. According to Richard Eck, when we say that a segment of the population has been excluded from the polity or abandoned by the nation, we also understand that this exclusion simultaneously constitutes a form of (political) inclusion. As Eck notes, “When *zoe* is included through an exclusion from the polis, i.e., abandoned, naked life is produced” (366). In discussing the contradictions and paradoxes of bare/naked life, Ewa Pionawska Ziarek likewise reminds us that bare life “stripped of political significance and exposed to murderous violence . . . is both the counterpart to and the target of sovereign violence” (90). Moreover, Ziarek points out that many of Agamben’s commentators often lose sight of the subtle and extremely important distinction between bare life and *zoe*: “bare life—wounded, expendable, and endangered—is not the same as biological *zoe*, but rather the *remainder of the destroyed political bios*” (emphasis mine, 90). It is precisely this notion of remainder of the destroyed political *bios* through which these literary and filmic texts reconfigure a Foucauldian concept of power in which the possibility of resistance is always inevitable.

This notion of the always present possibility of resistance becomes relevant when critiquing dominant discourses of disposability and human waste that reinscribe reified notions of female disempowerment, victimization, and loss of subjectivity.

How, then, does a critique of the necropolitical order of power link with a discussion of neoliberal rationalities in our analysis of Chicana/o literature and film? One of the more interesting ways in which Chicana/o film and literature make this connection is through representations of the material and discursive conditions of possibility of femicide and anti-female terror. More specifically, the representational strategies deployed in these texts draw our attention to the ways in which contemporary neoliberal discourses of “mismanaged life” or neoliberal responsabilization, to borrow from Graham Burchell, become entangled with abandonment, the production of bare life, and exceptionality in deadly and violent ways. Besides offering critical narratives designed to expose and challenge state-sponsored terrorism and social complicity with violence against mostly racialized, working-class or poor women from both sides of the international border, these texts offer interesting forays into thinking about how contemporary neoliberal discourses of individual blame link with the production of bare life, or, as Ziarek reminds us, the remainder of the political bios. Occupying an indeterminate position, the subaltern in these texts represent the abandoned but not necessarily the excluded—neither *zoe* or *bios*, but those rendered crucial to economic production, consumption, and social reproduction, but, nonetheless, able to be killed with impunity.⁴

⁴ It is for this reason that memorializing and honoring the dead and the disappeared emerge as an important form of resistance to the production of bare life and proliferation of disposability captured in the figure of the *homo sacer*. It is precisely through the honoring of the dead and disappeared that the negation of

Feminist scholar Wendy Brown argues that the citizen-subject of neoliberalism becomes the target of power through her or his freedom “not simply . . . because freedom within an order of domination can be an instrument of that domination, but because of neoliberalism’s *moralization* of the consequences of this freedom” (original emphasis, 44). In a different, yet related context, Fregoso describes the morality discourse alluded to above as “a persistent campaign to impose a moral interpretation on the killings . . . [echoing] the now familiar moral panic about modernity” (138-139). The neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility, as Fregoso suggests, adheres to a discourse of anxiety and panic about the debilitating effects of modernity and intensified globalization. Yet, the “crisis of modernity” rhetoric effectively retrenches patriarchal conceptions of “strong-arm masculinity” that rearticulate and rehearse a nostalgic lament about a supposedly by-gone era of normative patriarchy. This nostalgic turn to an unproblematic, idealized past represents a key contradiction between neoliberal rationalities of unencumbered individualism and an ethos of prudentialism *and* traditional gendered conservatism that eerily mirrors the neo-conservative Right’s “family values” campaign in the U.S.

My point here, however, is that dominant explanatory discourses of femicide, whether articulated in terms of personal blame or the so-called “collateral damage” of modernization, marks a distinctively neoliberal rationality or logic that imposes a moralizing effect upon certain segments of the population measured by one’s “capacity for ‘self-care.’” It is through the interpellation of individuals as entrepreneurial actors

sacrifice (not worthy of sacrifice) takes on new meaning. I do not mean to say that the crimes constitute a form of sacrifice (though some officials from both sides of the border have made this claim), but rather constitute a form of remembrance and honoring linked with the Judeo-Christian concept of redemption.

measured in good part “by configuring morality as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequence” (Brown, 42) that contradictions between dominant ideals of individual economic production and patriarchal notions of proper female conduct problematize governmental and corporate explanatory discourses of femicide.

Conditions of (Im)possibility: an Overview

Chapter 1, “The Maquila Complex: Necropolitical Landscapes and the Cartographies of Abandonment,” examines the ways in which Chicana filmic and literary representations critically articulate and engage with cultural narratives and images of femicide and anti-female terror by looking at three important contemporary cultural texts—*Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006) produced by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, *Señorita Extraviada: Missing Young Women* (2001) directed by Lourdes Portillo, and the novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba. This chapter focuses on the formal elements and rhetorical strategies of representation deployed by these texts, particularly the ways in which these seemingly two different film documentaries (re)configure the “conditions of possibility” underwriting various forms of social and political abandonment, exceptionality, and denationalization. In addressing the “conditions of possibility” for femicide, anti-female terror, and other forms of violence against poor, racialized groups, the chapter looks at the formal strategies of representation that bring to critical attention the principle aspects, components, or dimensions of the necropolitical order of power in the borderlands. Moreover, as an attempt to bridge the seemingly analytic disconnect between political-economic explanatory discourses of femicide and those discourses focusing on social and cultural systems of domination and violence against women, this

chapter also draws from scholarly work on necropolitics and states of exception. Drawing from Rosa Linda Fregoso's study of femicide through the lens of necropolitics, we can identify at least three important aspects of the relations of power related to the concept of the "border": the "boundaries of exclusion and inclusion," "belonging and otherness," and the intersection of multiple forces (e.g., denationalization, militarization, neoliberal "rollbacks", and ingovernability) that continue to proliferate violence and terror on the social and ecological landscape of the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso and the Tijuana/San Diego regions. This chapter, therefore, argues that the aforementioned documentaries strategically re-configure and critically re-frame the spatial and social relations of power by drawing to our attention the topography of surveillance, control, and containment that mark the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, belonging and otherness.

As Achille Mbembe reminds us, necropolitics involves "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" in which the order of power invested in the biological field as the fostering of the (good) life finds its corollary (or dialectical conjunct) in the reproduction of relations of enmity, impunity, and the right to kill and/or *expose to death*. Moreover, necropower, as it relates specifically to femicide and anti-female terror, operates on the principle of hypervisibility in which atrocities committed against women represents a "new language . . . through which the emerging necropolitical order communicates its total domination over the region" (Fregoso, 114). It is in this broader formulation of the necropolitical order that this chapter looks at the ways in which these texts move beyond the shop floor and refocus our attention toward the complex structuring forces proliferating violence and terror in what we might refer to

as the “maquiladora complex.” Lastly, while Mbembe situates his analysis of necropolitics specifically in the context of contemporary colonial occupation (e.g., apartheid in South Africa or the Israeli occupation of Palestine), the concept of necropolitics, nevertheless, opens a critical space for not only thinking about the multiple and intersecting social, political, and economic forces underwriting feminicide and impunity, but also for thinking about cultural representations of feminicide and impunity, particularly with respect to the production of the meaning of death and “the wars of interpretation.”

Chapter 2, “Reification, Disposability, and Resistance,” continues looking at these three same texts in order to investigate the ways in which these distinct genres of Chicana/o cultural production articulate and reconfigure feminicide in relation to social reification and cultural narratives of disposability. This chapter attempts to look at these two texts primarily through the Marxist concept of reification in order draw attention to the ways in which these texts imaginatively represent violence against women beyond immediate circumstances and towards a complex, contradictory narrative that captures the historicized gender, racial, and class dimensions of violence. In analyzing how these texts represent the intersecting cultural, social, and politico-economic forces conditioning the formation of feminicide and anti-female terror, this chapter focuses on several related ways of understanding reification. Drawing from Timothy Bewes’ analysis of reification, this chapter looks to the broader social, political, economic, and cultural spheres in which reification constitutes “what happens in every instance of racism and sexism, where the objects of prejudice are perceived not as human beings but as *things* or *types*” (quoted in Marcial González, emphases added, 13). In addition to focusing our attention on

representations of objectification, including ossification and thing-ification of social subjects and relations, this chapter also focuses on the ways in which reification can be understood in relation to problems of perception, the naturalizing of social inequalities, the fragmentation and compartmentalization of productive female activity, and the categorization of humans according to phenotype, anatomy, and other signifiers of cultural difference. And while this chapter looks at the manner in which the logic of commodity fetishism pervades every aspect of social life under neoliberal capitalism at the borderlands, it also points to the ways in which reification dangerously links with myths of disposability and human waste.

Drawing from Alicia Schmidt Camacho's analysis of the erasure of *mexicana* subjectivity in relation to explanatory discourses of femicide, this chapter looks at how *Señorita Extraviada* and *Desert Blood* engage with narratives and images of female death, particularly with the ways in which these texts (dis)articulate poor, racialized, women as always already consigned to an unchanging death-in-life and life-in-death. And while both texts certainly represent female subjectivity in terms of "contestation-in-struggle," to use Schmidt Camacho's terminology, they also dangerously come close to representing the victims of femicide as the inevitable outcome of neoliberal industrialization along the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

Chapter 3, "What 'We' Do Abroad: Liberal Internationalism and Transnational Adoption under Contemporary Neoliberalism at the Borderlands," engages with the cultural representations of the neoliberal (b)order along the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. This chapter links Foucauldian analyses of neoliberal governmentality with critiques of liberal internationalism and transnational adoption in order to draw out the ways in which

the novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* and the film *Bordertown* (2008) directed by Gregory Nava configure neoliberal rationalities embedded in the technologies of governing that produce discourses of blame, mismanaged life, and failed motherhood in relation to U.S. narratives of child rescue and humanitarian interventionism. While these texts configure the intimate relationship between sentimental narratives of rescue and neoliberal discourses of blame and misconduct, they also tend to depoliticize and erase the history of U.S. political, economic, and cultural hegemony at the borderlands by reproducing narratives of fear and threat from which narratives of sentimental rescue and heroic interventionism emerge.

While racial, gender, and class hierarchies have existed well before the implementation of neoliberalism at Mexico's northern frontier and the U.S. southwest, contemporary neoliberalism at the borderlands has effectively appropriated and exacerbated already existing structures of social domination, in addition to co-opting liberal notions of class and gender equality and the freedom of the citizen-subject. As an analysis of the complex representations of the social and cultural dynamics of the neoliberal project at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, this chapter proposes a critical reading of the social and political rationalities of neoliberalism shaping state and public forms of power.

However, in order to avoid reducing our analysis of the social and political consequences of neoliberalism too narrowly by focusing primarily on neoliberal economic policy and implementation, we turn a critical eye toward the micro dimensions of power represented in these texts. A critical analysis of the micro dimensions of power entails looking at the ways in which the relationship between the private and the public

and the individual and socio-economic realities are intimately linked to the social and political rationalities of contemporary neoliberalism embedded in technologies of neoliberal governmentality. One of the advantages of taking this analytical approach is that it allows us to focus on the complex operations of governance and power working simultaneously at both the micro and macro levels of everyday struggle and resistance. Drawing from Foucauldian studies on governmentality, particularly the ways in which these texts imaginatively configure “the conduct of conduct,”⁵ refocuses our attention to the material and discursive conditions out of which the subaltern are able to freely conduct themselves in relation to the state’s withdrawal from responsibility over the social and economic well-being of its citizens, denizens, and other productive subjects. Critical attention to both the technologies of neoliberal governmentality and socio-political rationalities allows for a reading of the complex ways in which the narrative representations of rescue and heroic intervention are often linked to images of failed motherhood, social backwardness, and cultural poverty.

⁵ According Foucault, “conduct of conduct” refers to the governing of others and the population (subjectification) and the governing of one’s self (subjectivation).

Chapter 1

The Maquila Complex: Necropolitical Landscapes and the Cartographies of Abandonment

The following chapter examines the ways in which the documentary films *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006) produced by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, *Señorita Extraviada: Missing Young Women* (2001) produced and directed by Lourdes Portillo, and the novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba critically engage with discourses and images of feminicide and anti-female terror along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.⁶ This chapter aims to critically assess the visual and literary representations of the material and ideological conditions of possibility that enable the reproduction of social and political abandonment and denationalized spaces as key apparatuses and mechanisms of what Rosa Linda Fregoso refers to as an emerging necropolitical order of power in the borderlands.⁷ Fregoso's critique of the interpretive discourses of feminicide begins by examining two distinct but related dominant explanatory narratives which she refers to as the "moral discourse" and the "globalization discourse." While the former imposes a moral interpretation upon non-traditional gender and sexual behavior and conduct, the later constitutes a unifying

⁶ This chapter draws from Jane Caputi and Diane E. H. Russell's definition of femicide and anti-female terror: "[Femicide] is on the extreme end of a continuum of anti-female terror that include a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse, such as rape, torture, sexual slavery, incestuous and extra familial child sexual abuse, physical and emotional battery, sexual harassment, genital mutilation, forced heterosexuality, forced sterilizations, [and] forced motherhood. . . Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicides" (quoted in Romero, 8).

⁷ In her analysis of feminicide on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, "We Want Them Alive!: The Politics and Culture of Human Rights," Rosa Linda Fregoso draws upon theories of sovereignty in order to articulate what she takes to be the convergence and intersection of multiple political, economic, and social forces and processes of the necropolitical order of power in the region: militarization, denationalization, neoliberalism, and ingovernability. Some of these processes of the necropolitical order will be taken up in more detail below.

trope (e.g., the exploitation of feminized wage labor) for explaining the brutal murders that, according to Fregoso, represent a gross conflation of exploited gendered bodies with their extermination. In pointing out the limits of this “monolithic, top-down” explanatory discourse, Fregoso turns to a methodological approach that attempts to capture the complex configuration of violence against women conditioned by the intersecting forces of political, economic, and social structures and institutions. As an attempt to bridge what I take to be an analytical disconnect between political-economic explanatory discourses and discourses focusing on social and cultural systems of domination and violence, this chapter draws from recent literature on neoliberalism and bio/necropolitics. In situating this analysis of the cultural representations of racialized, gendered, and classed violence by the state and civil society, we first turn to Fregoso’s formulation of what she identifies as an emerging necropolitical order of power in the region.

While certainly racism, patriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism constitute key intersecting structural forces engendering feminicide and anti-female terror, the “border” constitutes a central concept for theorizing the complex web of power relations reproducing such violence and terror. Drawing from Fregoso’s analysis of feminicide, we can identify at least three related aspects of the relations of power associated with the concept of the border: the “boundaries of exclusion and inclusion,” “belonging and otherness,” and the intersection of multiple political-economic forces (e.g., denationalization, militarization, neoliberal “rollbacks”, and ingovernability) reproducing the material and ideological conditions of possibility for the ongoing proliferation of violence and terror. In focusing our attention to the social and ecological repercussions of neoliberal capitalism and the emerging necropolitical order of power along the

borderlands, the cultural texts examined here, I argue, imaginatively (re)configure and bring to our attention the spatial and social cartographies of power underwriting feminicide and anti-female terror. In other words, the texts examined in this chapter imaginatively, yet critically, offer a visual and literary topography of racialized, gendered, and classed surveillance, control, and containment that mark the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, of belonging and otherness, and, ultimately, of life and exposure to death.

In a recent analysis of feminicide in the borderlands, Fregoso reflects on one of her earlier monographs entitled “Toward a Planetary Civil Society” in which she draws from Giorgio Agamben’s conceptualization of the state of emergency/exception. In her analysis of state-sponsored terrorism against poor, racialized women in Ciudad Juárez, Fregoso calls for resituating feminicide and anti-female terror as a problem that is “endemic to the state” rather than simply “a problem for the state” (110). And while this critical approach is useful for examining patriarchal structures of domination and oppression (that are often erased in globalization discourses), she identifies a serious methodological limitation of her earlier formulation and critique of feminicide. “My emphasis on state-sponsored terrorism,” she writes, “did not fully account for other social forces creating the conditions of possibility for the assassination of poor, racialized women in the region, nor did I specify the character and impact of an emerging order of power on the border: a necropolitical order” (100-111).⁸ Necropolitics, as Achille

⁸ It is noteworthy to mention that in her analysis of state-sponsored terrorism against racialized, poor women, Fregoso already begins formulating an analysis of necropolitics by virtue of her discussion of Agamben’s analysis of the state of emergency/exception and the production of *bare life*. She writes, “We should consider feminicide in Ciudad Juárez a part of the scenario of state-sponsored terrorism because it is situated in the ‘space of death’ which ‘is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness nowhere

Mbembe reminds us, involves “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” in which the order of power invested in the biological field as the fostering of life finds its corollary (or dialectical conjunct) in the reproduction of relations of enmity, impunity, the right to kill, and expose to death. Necropolitics, as it relates specifically to femicide and anti-female terror along the borderlands, operates on the principle of *hypervisibility* in which atrocities committed against women represent a socially symbolic act and a “new language . . . through which the emerging necropolitical order communicates its total domination over the region” (114). It is in keeping with this formulation of the necropolitical order that this chapter looks at the ways in which the visual and literary texts examined here take us beyond the “shop floor” and turn our attention toward the broader, more complex intersecting forces reproducing and proliferating violence and terror in what we might refer to as the maquiladora complex or “maquila complex.”

I utilize the term “maquila complex” to point to the ways in which these textual representations configure the ecology and relations of production conditioned by the maquiladora industry, particularly its mode of production, labor relations, and its political and economic partnership with the state. In developing the concept of the “maquila complex,” I draw from Mathew Coleman’s study of neoliberal governmentality in which he examines the socio-political and economic contradictions of the U.S.-Mexico border region through the term “trade/security nexus.” Drawing from this concept, the term “maquila complex” is intended to identify and label maquiladora production as an accumulation/control nexus in which capital accumulation and technologies of social

more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes” (M. Taussig quoted in Fregoso, “Towards a Planetary Society,” 20).

control and containment characterize this particular form of necropower under the politico-economic exigencies of contemporary neoliberalism.

In an important essay titled “Necropolitics,” postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe raises two key questions related to the exercise of sovereignty in late-modernity that bears critical importance to our discussion of Chicana/o filmic and literary representations of femicide and anti-female terror: “[U]nder what conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or expose to death exercised? What are the “relations of enmity that sets that person against his or her murder?” (12) For instance, in the context of femicide and anti-female terror, these questions focus our attention to how these texts configure the indigenous in relation to the majority of the population in both Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Moreover, these texts articulate the “relations of enmity” by emphasizing gender disparities within a violent patriarchal system of power exercised by both men and women on both sides of the border. Issues of class come to fore as these texts configure the relationship between poor, working-class peoples and politico-economic elites through images and narratives of disposability. Whether articulated in terms of class, race, or gender, impunity emerges as a *de facto* exercise of social and political power akin to the right to kill and/or expose to death. While certainly there exists no legal right to kill in such a capricious and indiscriminate manner, paradoxically the persistence and proliferation of femicide without punishment or retribution virtually renders the division between the right to kill and laws forbidding murder within a zone of indeterminacy and, therefore, situates femicide and anti-female terror, by virtue of impunity, on the threshold of exceptionality. Furthermore, the right to kill indiscriminately, expressed socially in the form of impunity, constitutes a technology of

social control and discipline over women. As a spectacle of fear and threat, impunity constitutes a mechanism of governing that reproduces a disciplinary effect that stretches over a large segment of society.⁹ And while the “right to kill” or “to allow to live” constitutes the more conspicuous formations of the biopolitical/necropolitical dialectic, I want to emphasize how the *exposure to death* constitutes an equally important dimension of the sovereign right to foster life and/or contain or exterminate it. Furthermore, while arguably “exposure to death” seems to bear little relationship to the idea of hypervisibility, it nonetheless constitutes a key representational strategy that has a chilling effect upon viewers and consumers of images of the deceased. It is precisely the ways in which these texts reconfigure the intersecting ideological and material conditions of possibility for femicide and anti-female terror that deserve critical attention.

Although Mbembe specifically situates his analysis of necropolitics in the context of contemporary colonial occupation, his study nevertheless offers a critical lens through which to analyze cultural discourses of femicide and anti-female terror, particularly with respect to the production of the meaning of death and “the wars of interpretation” surrounding discourses of femicide.¹⁰ And while Mbembe undoubtedly points to the apartheid regime of South Africa and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as crucial sites of colonial occupation in late modernity, violence against women in the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso border region raises questions concerning the cultural politics of murder in which necropower is deployed by both the state and civil society on both sides of the

⁹ This is particularly true for family members and friends of the deceased or disappeared, and to those exposed to graphic media images of corpses and mutilated bodies abandoned across the Chihuahua desert landscape or abandoned factory buildings on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

¹⁰ See Melissa W. Wright’s “Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide,” pp. 708-711.

international border through technologies of impunity, including discourses of individual blame and modernization that deflect responsibility away from political and economic institutions and toward the victims themselves.

As this chapter intends to demonstrate, the visual and literary representations examined here imaginatively and critically engage with the spatialities of violence and technology of impunity, in which socio-political abandonment and denationalization constitute specific articulations of the necropolitical order operating in everyday social spaces and upon the bodies of the “potentially dead.” The reproduction of social boundaries and hierarchies captured in these cultural representations draw our attention to the spatialities of violence and exposure to death. In these texts, graphic representations of corpses and cadavers articulate a spectacle of violence that, on the one hand, expose audiences to the atrocities of the murders and disappearances, and, on the other, come dangerously close to reifying the victims as disempowered and disposable.¹¹ As *Señorita Extraviada* and *Desert Blood* suggest, the disappeared are often discovered through the persistent efforts of family members, friends, activists, investigative journalists, rather than through those of the state. Representations of deadly social boundaries extend beyond the cadaver scenes of the Chihuahua desert and into multiple settings, including workplaces, neighborhoods, and various public and private spaces. Moreover, I want to draw attention to the ways in which these texts engage with governmental and popular discourses of blame and mismanaged life (narratives of “public women,” for example)

¹¹ In Chapter 2, “Reification, Disposability, and Resistance,” I draw from the Marxist concept of reification in order to analyze how these three same texts imaginatively represent violence against women beyond immediate circumstances and towards a more complex, nuanced and contradictory narrative that engages with the historicized gender, racial, and class dimensions of feminicide and anti-female terror. In short, Chapter 2 looks at the ways in which these three texts paradoxically both challenge and collaborate with discourses that reproduce notions of victimization, disempowerment, and loss of subjectivity.

that, I argue, constitute crucial aspects of the cultural politics of death and the wars of interpretation over the meanings of femicide and disappearance. Drawing attention to the socio-historical contexts from which violence against the subaltern emerges, the texts examined in this chapter offer images and narratives of social violence and ecological destruction, as well as stories of survival and resistance. It is through such filmic representations like *Maquilapolis* and *Señorita Extraviada* that viewers encounter the daily instantiations of socio-political abandonment, denationalization, and exceptionality existing along the squatter colonies and cartolandia located squarely within the confines of the “maquila complex.”

The Cultural Politics of Abandonment

In light of Fregoso’s critique of the conflation of exploitable labor with the extermination of mostly poor, racialized, young women along the U.S.-Mexico border region, it may appear somewhat peculiar to begin this discussion of the cultural politics of death with an analysis of maquiladora production, labor, and social relations. In her analysis of necropolitics in the region, Fregoso highlights the rather tenuous relationship between maquiladora production/labor and femicide. The privileging of this causal relationship between maquiladora production and labor and femicide constitutes what Fregoso refers to as a “false positive.” In her critique of this causal relationship, Fregoso refocuses our attention upon other social and cultural forces underwriting femicide and disappearance. However, in keeping with Steven Volk and Marian Schlotterbeck’s analysis of gendered violence associated with maquiladora production, we must not lose sight of the ways in which the assembly plants constitute “the basic economic and social forces” creating the conditions of possibility that enable ongoing violence against

women. In keeping with this line of inquiry, this section examines representations of the relationship between the relations of production within the maquila plant *and* the surrounding sociological and ecological environments conditioned by maquiladora production. By looking at these texts through a perspective that considers neoliberalism and necropolitics, we can draw critical connections between such documentary films like *Maquilapolis* and *Señorita Extraviada* that at first sight appear to bear little or no relationship to one another with respect to femicide and anti-female terror. However, as these films suggest, it is precisely through the exposure to death that the relationship between neoliberal governmentality and necropolitics converge in violent and deadly ways.

While the film documentaries *Maquilapolis* and *Señorita Extraviada* appear to bear little or no relationship to one another with respect to femicide, they do nonetheless draw critical attention to the social and ecological perils of neoliberal capitalism in the border cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The ways in which both films produce meaning and engage critically with violence against the subaltern is achieved through careful and strategic combinations of sound, cinematography, and narrative style and perspective. *Maquilapolis* represents the Tijuana/San Diego border region as a site where global capitalism, neoliberal governmentality, and social relations of power intersect in violent and, often times, deadly ways. More specifically, in investigating and documenting maquiladora production and labor, the emergence of squatter towns and cartolandia surrounding the plants, general environmental destruction and toxicity affecting nearby residents, and the alarming disinvestment in basic services by both the state and transnational corporations accumulating exorbitant amounts of capital in this

region, the film offers a striking critique of the multiple and overlapping dimensions of social and political abandonment under neoliberal capitalism.

Señorita Extraviada investigates the rape, murder, and disappearance of mostly young women in Ciudad Juárez. In addition to documenting the alarming number of young, poor women murdered or disappeared along the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso border region since at least the early 1990s, the film offers an intimate biographical account of the victims, including testimonials from family members and friends of the deceased or missing. In documenting the personal, familial, and work-related histories of the victims, the film reveals the political and socio-economic conditions underwriting the murder and kidnapping of women, marked most notably by the proliferation of state-sponsored impunity. *Señorita Extraviada*, Portillo explains on the documentary website, “moves like the unsolved mystery . . . [and] poetically investigates the circumstances of the murders and the horror, fear and courage of the families whose children have been taken” (www.lourdesportillo.com/senoritaextraviada/). As the documentary investigates the intersection of gender, class, and race as it bears directly to the proliferation of violence against women, it becomes more evident how this film gradually attempts to challenge the normalization of state-sponsored impunity that has fostered the conditions of possibility that enable violence against women, particularly the ways in which patriarchy and paternalism become articulated through governmental and public explanatory discourses.¹² Moreover, I would argue that the film draws attention to the ways in which both “moral discourses” and “globalization discourses” operate in the service of impunity as a particular modality of power expressed as “the right to kill.” As both *Maquilapolis*

¹² As Fregoso suggests, these explanatory discourses are often articulated in moralizing terms or in terms of the inevitable consequences of neoliberal modernization.

and *Señorita Extraviada* make clear, it is the relationship between policy making and popular representations of death that governmental discourses and popular imaginaries of femicide become enmeshed and entangled in complex and often imperceptible ways. In constructing a carefully framed narrative that draws together global forces and local instantiations of power, the film calls for greater critical attention to both the spatial and social relations of power conditioned largely by this specific mode of production, labor, and social organization, particularly the silence surrounding human rights abuses and violence against women conditioned in large part the climate of fear produced in large part by state-sponsored impunity.

Maquilapolis features two maquiladora workers (*obreras*) and labor activists (*promotoras*), Carmen Durán and Lourdes Lujan, who offer intimate visual and oral narratives or *testimonios* of their respective neighborhoods and places of work. When viewing *Maquilapolis* and *Señorita Extraviada* for the first time, we are immediately struck by the way in which both films privilege narratives produced from the perspective of the women and men engaged in the daily struggles of poverty and violence “on the ground.” While both films offer moving images and narratives that invoke shock, disgust, and sympathy achieved largely through such effective rhetorical devices like the juxtaposition of intimate narrative stylization and graphic imagery, *Maquilapolis* relies almost entirely on the strategic use of “interpersonal videography” in which the filmmakers Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre take no part in the film’s oral narrative.¹³ In deploying this interpersonal videographic approach, the film achieves a high level of rhetorical efficacy that, to borrow from Foucault, redirects our attention to

¹³ This is quite distinct from *Señorita Extraviada* in which film producer and director Lourdes Portillo narrates several scenes of the film.

the microphysics of power and the daily instantiations of resistance that these *obreras* and *promotoras* experience in their quest toward social and economic justice. This attention to the microphysics of power, however, certainly does not entail precluding from inquiry the juridico-legal and political economic dimensions of power associated with the state and the global economy. On the contrary, *Maquilapolis* directs our attention to the interstices of the local and global, to the imbrication of socio-cultural forces and institutional structures that collude and collide in powerfully devastating as well as resistant and redemptive ways. In doing so, *Maquilapolis* offers a skillfully rendered critique of export assembly-line production in Tijuana. This is achieved through a complex combination of camera positioning, diegetic sound and music, and interpersonal oral narration that foreground the sensual, corporeal, and psychological dimensions of gendered labor exploitation, environmental racism, and social exclusion and abandonment of those deemed “free” to work and reside squarely within that peculiar spatiality known as the “maquila complex.”

After briefly introducing Carmen Durán, the documentary turns to a bird’s eye view of the Pacific Ocean in which the Mexico-U.S. border eventually comes into view. Out of the deep water emerges the cold, metallic bearer that divides the warm sandy beaches of the Border Field State Park on the U.S. side of the border and the Tijuana Beach to the south. In this carefully constructed opening scene, the corrugated steel barrier stamps upon this seemingly contiguous landscape an inscription of the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, constituting one of several key moments in which the cartography of the necropolitical order is captured on film.

I draw attention to this opening scene in order to analyze the ways in which “borders,” as Fregoso reminds us, function at multiple scales, both within and across international borders.¹⁴ While the opening scene described above draws attention to the constructedness of the border by contextualizing the peculiar emergence of an artificial barrier out of the seemingly undifferentiated oceanscape, later scenes from the film capture similar “peculiar emergences” where out of the geographic landscape of the Tijuana hillsides appear squatter colonies and cartolandia situated below the towering maquiladora plants perched high above. The spatial relationship between the maquiladoras and the colonias eerily recalls visual representations of the spatialities of power exhibited by medieval castles and rooks situated in relation to peasant communities located at perceptibly lower elevation. In analyzing the spatial contours and vertical dimensionality of the “maquila complex,” I turn to Mbembe’s discussion of the “dynamics of territorial fragmentation” in which necropower operates not only through the “conclusive divisions between two nations across a boundary line,” (28) but more importantly for our analysis of the film, through the production of “multiple separations, provisional boundaries, which relate to each other through surveillance and control” (Eyal Weizman quoted in Mbembe, 28). In drawing from this concept of territorial fragmentation, I hope to illustrate how *Maquilapolis* critically attends to the underlying multiple, provisional, yet seemingly imperceptible boundaries of social exclusion and abandonment underwriting violence against women. In particular, I argue that this film

¹⁴ As alluded to above, Fregoso identifies three related dimensions of the relations of power associated with the concept of the border: 1) “boundaries of exclusion and inclusion”; 2) “belonging and otherness”; 3) intersecting structural forces, including militarization, neoliberalism, and denationalization, that constitute, among others, the conditions of possibility for the proliferation of violence and terror along this border region.

draws attention to the cartography of vertical power and territorial fragmentation through carefully framed video and camera images of the geographic layout of the “maquila complex” and the relational order of power inscribed and symbolized by this particular spatiality. While documenting the socio-ecological effects of maquiladora production upon the residents of *Colonia Lagunitas*, Carmen captures on video an old pick-up truck struggling along an unpaved, dusty road. Soon, however, the camera focuses on a startling panoramic view of the sprawling colonia located along the foothills of a nearby maquila situated high above scoping the entire landscape with a measure of panoptic assurance. In capturing this particular spatial organization, Carmen effectively foregrounds the necropolitical cartography of power captured in graphic representations of the sociological and ecological environments of the squatter colonies and cartolandia located at the foothills below the “castle and rook” of the maquiladora plants. The topography of the maquiladora plant in relation to the surrounding squatter colony and cartolandia captures the hierarchal order of power symbolized by the politico-economic elite positioned at higher elevation to that of the laboring class below. While the shiny, modernized architectural structure of the maquila plant adorned with lush green lawns and spacious parking lots, equipped, of course, with a cast of security personal and other barriers of entry tell the story of economic development and modernization, the lived realities and experiences of those struggling in the squatter colonies and cartolandia tell a quite different one.

Although Mbembe’s discussion of the division of occupied territories speaks directly to colonial occupation in Palestine, the concept of “territorial fragmentation” offers a critical perspective through which to analyze the representations of the cartographies of

necropower in this film, particularly the ways in which the construction/destruction of social spaces and infrastructural (dis)investment underwrite in large degree the conditions of possibility for violence and terror in the region. Although it is certainly difficult to characterize the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in terms of colonial occupation,¹⁵ what Mbembe describes as the “topographical variation” of vertical sovereignty and territorial fragmentation suggests how certain “natural” environments like waterways, mountains, hilltops and valleys transform (and are, thus, transfigured in cultural representations) into nodes, “outposts,” or enclaves of surveillance, discipline, and containment. If, as Mbembe suggests, “high ground offers strategic assets not found in the valleys (effective of sight, self-protection, panoptic fortification that generates gazes to many different ends),” (28) then it would be instructive to look at the ways in which this documentary draws critical attention to the topography of settlement and of social control and discipline that constitutes and is constitutive of the uneven relations of power existing along the “maquila complex,” that is the broader relations of production and social relations contained within the maquiladoras and the surrounding squatter colonies and cartolandia.

In a scene titled “Infrastructure,” the camera takes us, the viewer, into the intimate surroundings of Carmen’s neighborhood and home. As the camera captures on film the house that Carmen built with discarded material, the scene immediately focuses upon a sequence of shiny, metallic letters: K-A-U-F-M-A. Presumably these once valued

¹⁵ The concept “vertical sovereignty,” however, is more appropriately situated in a discussion of contemporary border enforcement and immigration policing (from the early-1990s to the present), especially the ways in which aerial and subterranean surveillance techniques and the 1992 relaxation of the *Posse Comitatus* characterize militarized border enforcement, which, according to Rosa Linda Fregoso, constitutes an important feature of the necropolitical order of power along the U.S.-Mexico border. See Fregoso’s “We Want Them Alive!” (2006)

placards of family distinction once adorned the home of the Kaufman family in the U.S., perhaps just several miles north across the international border in San Diego. After installing the walls and a roof of her new house, despite having no electricity, running water, and sewage, she tells us that house is finally ready for settlement. Alongside her house are stacked wood pallets, pieces of wood, and other discarded material that, we can assume, are stockpiled nearby in order to create fire to heat water, cook food, and provide warmth. However, what is especially alarming to Carmen is the lack of sewage lines in her neighborhood. While describing the lack of sewage lines in the colonia, the camera takes us to an unpaved intersection with three houses located in the distance. Pools of muddy water and tire tracks embedded across the wet and littered streets mark this unpaved intersection. Out of the right corner of the screen emerges a soccer ball bouncing across an unpaved road that finally settles within a murky puddle of water. Out of frustration, Carmen remarks, “Look, there’s a ball. That’s a source of infections because of sewage coming from the houses. Kids play in this water. See how that girl gets the ball [with her feet] and goes to play on our neighborhood ball court.” A few moments later, the camera documents Carmen’s young boy playing soccer in the street. As if powerless to warn him of the inherent danger that the ball now comes to represent, Carmen captures on film her son picking up a ball in a puddle with his bare hands.

In the following scene, Carmen directs us to the ways in which her community has developed survival strategies and everyday tactics of resistance against social abandonment. In this scene, members of her community have developed techniques for “pirating” electricity from nearby electrical lines. As the camera zooms to a bundle of crowded wires hooked up to a main electrical line with several thick electrical cables

sizzling and cracking on the muddy, unpaved streets, Carmen recounts how members of her community have resorted to illicit yet resourceful means of securing electricity. However, it is precisely the manner in which these members of the community must resort to illicit means of securing this basic utility that the contradictions of economic development and modernization become glaringly apparent in this film. Moreover, it is also precisely the way in which the film recounts the tenacious and resourceful energy and agency of the members of this community that the failures of the state to provide the most basic infrastructural requirements come to the fore. As Carmen's videography suggests, the inability or incapacity of the state to provide adequate electricity or potable, running water, and sewage registers how this particular social space emerges as a denationalized space, one that is certainly marked by social and political abandonment. Yet, as the film suggests, such spaces of abandonment are marked by physical and psychological harm and danger, even death. "As you can see, all these cables are piled and tangled up—[sizzling electrical cable in mud] Do you hear that? When the wires touch each other, they short-circuit and burn. If a child steps here, he could be electrocuted. Do you hear how the wires sizzle when they touch water?" The sound of sizzling wires and the murky water containing high voltage electricity juxtaposed to Carmen's composed and "matter-of-fact" narrative tone effectively captures one of the most insidious but often concealed dimensions of socio-political abandonment. Only a few hundred yards away stands in the clear the towering figure of a "maquiladora rook."¹⁶ Furthermore, the combination of explicit visuals and striking diegetic sound

¹⁶ I use the term "rook" to signify two important characteristics of the maquiladora industry represented in this film, particularly the ways in which the maquila complex simultaneously functions as the "castle"

offer an emotionally moving testimonial narrative that captures not only the more evident spatialities of social abandonment but also the less apparent psychological trauma and anxiety associated with the exposure to death. As if to dispel any notion of the potentiality or possibility of harm and violence, Carmen sets out to interview one of her neighbors, Vicente, in which we learn of the near tragic death of his young daughter.

Carmen: Good morning, Vicente, how have you been?

Vicente: Fine.

C: Tell me about when your daughter was electrocuted.

V: I was at work, fixing a car, when suddenly they called out: the girl fell in the water! A friend took us the Red Cross. On the way, I was giving her air, hitting her on the chest. She vomited purple and red blood. I thought she was dead, but I asked God to help and he did.

C: Is she your only daughter?

V: [As if unable to utter a sound, he subtly nods his head up and down, turns his face to his daughter, then looks down at the ground.]

In addition to documenting the near-tragic death of Vicente's daughter, the conversation, in a rather understated way, raises two important related issues. Firstly, it is significant and rather telling that Vicente should seek emergency medical services through the humanitarian aid organization, Red Cross.¹⁷ While providing community services like blood drives and health information clinics in many "First World" nations, the Red Cross in developing countries often tackles relief disaster issues, particularly so-called natural disasters, and constitutes an important component of emergency medical services where the state is either unable or unwilling to provide such services to its citizens. As recent scholarship on neoliberal governmentality reminds us, the rollback of the state does not

piece in this chess game of neoliberal capitalism and as the "swindler" in which certain segments of the population are said to have been rooked by policies and mythologies of modernization.

¹⁷ In addition to domestic disaster relief, the Red Cross offers community services for needy communities and international relief and development programs. As of 2009, the Red Cross in Tijuana provided over 95% of all ambulance services and 60% of trauma victim care. "Tijuana Red Cross Facing Red Numbers at Bloody Times." Rpt. by Mariana Martínez. *La Prensa San Diego*, Vol. XXXIII (Oct. 16, 2009)

necessarily signify the elimination of government, but rather the recalibration of governing state resources and the population. As Wendy Larner points out, “while neoliberalism may mean less government, it does not follow that there is less governance” (12). It is the ways in which the film captures this form of governance that the deadly relationship between necropower and neoliberalism become more evident. Secondly, the notion of divine intervention plays a significant role in this narrative of tragedy and rescue. While religious faith and the belief in divine intervention signify powerful cultural practices and social ideological positions deployed at various levels of society in the service of both social discipline and justice, it is nonetheless interesting the way in which Vicente frames this near-tragic story, one in which this “happy ending” emerges from the “grace of God.” If indeed divine intervention and God’s grace come to explain this miraculous event, then it begs the question of the omission of the social. In other words, it raises the question of government and the political rationalities of governing in which social security and state welfarism evaporate through the neoliberal shift in governing in which responsible citizens are marked as autonomous, individualized subject charged with practicing an ethics of prudentialism. Finally, an elderly woman, perhaps a friend of the family or the grandmother of the girl, puts in few words what this discussion has been trying to articulate all along: “We’ve been abandoned.” “But at election time,” she continues, “there we go like sheep.” By addressing these distinct but related aspects of infrastructural neglect and disinvestment through a carefully constructed sequence of image, sound, and testimony, this scene offers a counter-narrative that foregrounds the material and ideological dimensions of

social abandonment existing under this particular formation of necropower and neoliberalism.

Moreover, *Maquilapolis* takes issue with the kinds of differential rights granted to certain segments of the population and barriers to social services and state resources that constitute this specific form of social abandonment and denationalization occurring alongside the exorbitant amounts of wealth produced alongside the maquiladora plants. While undoubtedly labor exploitation, sexual harassment, and gendered and racialized forms of domination and subordination constitute the conditions of possibility for violence against women within the maquila plant, the documentary moves beyond the shop floor and offers a more complex and nuanced assessment of the broader sociological and ecological dimensions of the “maquila complex.”

In a later scene from the film, we are introduced to Lourdes Lujan, fellow *obrero* and *promotora* of Carmen Durán. Lourdes’ video begins with what looks to be plastic computer parts left in an open field of wild grass and dirt mounds. As she begins her video diary (“I’ve turned on the camera and I’ll tell you a little bit about my life.”) she turns our attention to a cartolandia located nearby a maquila plant in which a pool of dark water lies still surrounded by automobile parts, paper and plastic materials, and other discarded objects. “I live in a neighborhood called Chilpancingo. . . .,” she informs us, “There’s the river where people cross.” As the camera draws our attention to a bus struggling across a waist-high river that cuts alongside a populated section of the colonia, she then takes us to a secluded area of what looks to be a still, dark body of water. It is at this point in the film that Lourdes relates her story of the river’s transformation from one

that had served as a major source of utility and pleasure to the community to one of decay and liability.

I've always lived in this neighborhood . . . and the river has always been here. When I was a kid it was clean. When I got a little older and started working in the factories, I saw that the water was changing colors. Now sometimes it's black, green, red or foamy . . . I used to bathe here. What I loved was that families used to come to camp and swim. I look at the sad reality. Now the river has been destroyed. I wish my kids could have enjoyed this river as I did.

The film's representation of the destruction of this precious communal resource and space of communal gathering registers the devastating effects of the "maquila complex" in ways that underscore the intimate relationship between a people and land and between a community's sense of identity and perception of place. The important connection between land and people emphasizes the devastating impact ecological degradation has upon the material well-being of the community and its sense of self and identity. Equally important, the scene focuses attention to the crucial ways that such ecological degradation further impacts popular conceptions of disposability while reproducing the very conditions of possibility that allow particular segments of the population to be exposed to harm, violence, even death. In the wake of environmental destruction emerges a sociological and ecological "minefield" in which forms of social abandonment and exclusion confer upon this social space the status of exceptionality in which the seemingly unthinkable is not only rendered thinkable but possible.

In a later scene that could appropriately be titled "The Industrial City," the film brings into focus what I have been referring to as the cartography of the necropolitical order where the vertical positionality of the maquila plant in relation to the surrounding colonias constitutes one of the more important dimensions of structural violence

associated with the maquila complex. As the camera reveals a panoramic view of a maquiladora plant located on a hilltop, an unidentified young woman states what seems to be the obvious: “The ‘Industrial City’ is up on the mesa, and we’re down below.”

However, it is precisely the obvious that warrants our attention for several reasons.

Firstly, recurring images of the topographical relationship between the colonias and the maquiladora plants constitute one of the film’s central tropes, at least early on in the film. The reality of the maquiladora plants situated on hilltops towering over the squatter towns and cartolandia would appear to contradict the notion that the film deploys the use of figurate language or imagery “in a sense other than that which is proper to it” (OED) as described above. I argue, however, that it is precisely because of this very real but seemingly indiscernible topographical relationship (of power) that this recurring image gains its figurative status. In other words, it is precisely because the obvious has been effectively rendered obscure and concealed that the film is able to reinscribe upon this topographical relationship symbolic meaning which brings us to our next point.

Through this recurring image, the film offers a cartographic representation of power that links neoliberal governmentality and necropolitics in interesting ways. Armed with the “inexorable force of economic globalization” discourse, contemporary neoliberal advocates predict that the global extension of free-market reforms inevitably lead to greater socio-economic global prosperity. However, as Roberts, Secor, and Sparke suggest, we should not overlook the fact that structural adjustment, fiscal austerity, and unimpeded free trade are augmented by direct military force and, I would add, civilian modalities of securitization including the implementation of private security firms, local law enforcement, and socio-cultural forms of gendered and racialized surveillance and

discipline (887). Also, as Lisa Lowe suggests in her analysis of immigrant literatures, “dissident voices have pointed out that although the abstract ideal of modernity has been the pursuit of universal human freedom through modernization, the process employed in this pursuit . . . have themselves brought new forms of ‘unfreedom’: new, different forms of exploitation, disease, crime, and inhumanity” (2). It is precisely the way in which neoliberal discourses of development and modernization link with the exposure to death that the perils of this symbiotic relationship emerge in this film.

Lastly, while the maquilas gain several logistical advantages due to higher elevation in terms of security, transportation, storage of materials, and waste disposal, it is the way in which the film draws a critical connection between the logistical problem of waste disposal and human disposability that the exposure to death gains greater visibility. While I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter the limits and pitfalls associated with narratives and images of human waste, it would be instructive to consider how this film refocuses our attention to the specific forms of human disposability associated with the deadly relationship between neoliberal governmentality and necropolitics in this particular border region. The film effectively draws attention to the production of human disposability, particularly to those situated “beneath the plants” within this specific spatiality of power.¹⁸

Immediately after stating the spatial relationship between the maquila and the colonia, the woman continues her testimonial: “All their chemicals end up in our neighborhood.

¹⁸ I purposively use the phrase “situated ‘beneath’ the plants” to emphasize the deadly relationship between the symbolic and actual dimensions of power discussed here. In doing so, the phrase conjures up an image of a graveyard or cemetery. I also realized how such imagery tends to reinscribe reified conceptions of disempowerment, victimization, and loss of agency consistent with discourses of morality and globalization.

People here have gotten sores on their legs and feet. . . For three days this water has had this color and smell.”¹⁹ Lourdes enters the conversation as she speaks about how she constantly gets sick and suffers from lesions and spots on her arms. At this very moment in the film, Lourdes appears to concede that she in fact enjoys times of relative good health, thus giving the impression that all is not as bad as one might perceive. However, even during this brief conciliatory moment, the scars on both her arms belie even this modest claim as the camera reveals the physical markers of making disposable. Large, red splotched circles with scabs run the entire length of both arms. Children, we are told, suffer a similar fate.

“In *Lourdes Tells a Toxic Tale*,” we learn the story of a U.S.-owned maquiladora that unexpectedly shut down and left the community in a wasteland of toxic materials.

According to Lourdes,

I started as a *promotora* because of a sign inviting ten women to participate in a health survey for the San Diego Environmental Health Coalition. When I started I noticed problems: kids born without fingernails. . . I learned about cases of hydrocephalus where they have to put a shunt in the brain. I saw cases of anencephaly, when babies are born without a brain and die at birth. The birth defects here are because of the pollution, especially the waste left by Metales and Derivados. It is an abandoned factory with 6,000 tons of lead slag left exposed to the elements.

Moreover, when the factory closed shop, the plant left the community with tons of cast-off batteries. According to Magdalena Cerda of the Environmental Health Coalition, in 1994, when the factory abandoned its production site, it left an alarming amount of toxic

¹⁹ In the novel “*El Puente*,” Ito Romo imaginatively draws links between Chicana/o communities and neoliberalism along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands that, as Claudia Sadowski-Smith points out, “emphasizes the environmental consequences of U.S.-led maquiladorization” (44). Throughout the novel, residents on both sides of the border offer numerous explanations for the dark red coloration of the Rio Bravo separating Mexico and the U.S. While the mystery of the color of the river is never entirely revealed, the factories located along both sides of the river are certainly implicated in this “man-made, natural” disaster.

material behind, including, “sulfuric acid, cadmium, plastic and lead.” Lourdes informs us that clean-up efforts are estimated to be in the millions of dollars. “We learned that it’s up to the Mexican government to clean it,” Lourdes adds, “and they say they don’t have the money to do it.” In this scene, Lourdes points to one the more contradictory and paradoxical aspects of neoliberalism, namely the notion that less government creates greater socio-economic prosperity and security while greater governance translates into “a range of techniques that would enable the state to divest itself of many of its obligations” (Rose, et. al. 91). Moreover, in this rather short but significant scene, the relationship between neoliberal responsabilization and necropower comes to the fore. Notions of individual responsibility and freedom converge in interesting ways. As Nikolas Rose, Pat O’Malley, and Marian Valverde make clear, under neoliberal governmentality, “Subjects [are] obliged to be free and . . . required to conduct themselves responsibly, to account for their own lives and their vicissitudes in terms of their freedom” (90). While certainly this notion of neoliberal responsabilization overlaps with discourses of blame and “mismanaged life” in the context of femicide, I would argue that it speaks quite effectively to the ways in which socio-economic inequities and ecological devastation get articulated and, ultimately, deflected from governmental and corporate accountability by literally transferring the onerous of liability and responsibility upon the citizens themselves, that is to say upon the victims of the crimes. In the context of this scene, the community is then left with an irresolvable situation—either address or fix the problem by your own means *or* move to another location, of which neither constitutes a viable option.

The documentary provides an equally powerful sequence of images in which children jumping across sewage water and playing along a polluted river, and alongside discarded, rusty car frames, produces an unsettling juxtaposition of word and image, of ecological and sociological crisis and survival. The combination of images of social deprivation, ecological degradation, and childhood playfulness foregrounds the inherent contradictions of this particular politico-economic order and speaks to both the normalization and concealment of socio-political abandonment. But as the film also makes clear, members of the community are actively involved in exposing and remedying the material conditions of deprivation and abandonment. To the credit of the videographers, the film focuses on the ongoing fight against normative conceptions and “matter-of-fact” narratives that often obscure the effects of neoliberal capitalism at the border or, more insidiously, justify such violent effects as the “price to pay” or “collateral damage” of economic development and modernization.

As was the case with governmental incapacity, indifference, and strategy of control with respect to femicide and anti-female terror in Ciudad Juárez, this space of abandonment marks an important dimension in the necropolitical order of power in the form of socio-political abandonment. As the film makes clear, social justice guaranteed by the state as part of its obligation toward maintaining public safety and redress for injustices incurred by its citizens is but rendered politically insolvent as the exception in this case becomes the norm. Perhaps, more disturbingly, the rendering of certain social spaces and segments of the population as exceptional spaces and subjects of the state constitutes part of a larger set of technologies of governance under contemporary neoliberalism in this region. Under this shifting and flexible model of governance, the

biopolitics of fostering life and population management finds its inextricable corollary or dialectical conjunct in the exposure to death, that is to say, in the politics of death.

(In)visibility and the Spatialities of Death

In a timely and provocative essay entitled “Gendering Necropolitics: The Juridical-Political Sociality of Honor Killings in Turkey,” Cihan Ahmetbeyzade examines what she identifies as a “problematic relationship between law and violence” that underwrites the “exceptional conditions that construct different and violent experiences for women of [contemporary] Turkey” (188). For the purposes of this study, her essay draws attention to exceptional conditions that construct different experiences for women.²⁰

Ahmetbeyzade points to three important theorists of sovereignty that inform her analysis: Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe. “Their theoretical contributions,” she writes, “open up the potential for a conceptualization of a smaller model for gendered zones of death: a social, political, and legal treatment of honor killings as a juridical transgression in Turkey” (188). While Ahmetbeyzade’s analysis focuses on contemporary formations of violence against women in Turkey, her analysis draws interesting links between gendered violence and Agamben’s conceptualization of *homo sacer*.²¹ The killing of women in the context of honor killings in Turkey registers what we might call an ontological reduction of politically relevant human life to that of

²⁰ While Ahmetbeyzade’s study focuses specifically on honor killings in contemporary Turkey, this chapter focuses on her discussion of “gendered zones of death” and how this may prove instructive for an analysis of cultural representations of feminicide and anti-female terror in relation to what Fregoso calls the emerging necropolitical order of power in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

²¹ *Homo Sacer* is an obscure Roman legal figure that simultaneously marks inclusion into the polis by her/his very exclusion from the polis. As such, *homo sacer* is able to be killed with impunity but not considered worthy of sacrifice. It is through this paradoxical “inclusive exclusion” that the state of exception is realized and, argues Agamben, where “man as a living being presents himself no longer as an *object* but as the *subject* of political power” (Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9).

“bare life,” a form of life “whose human rights are kept at the threshold of simultaneously being included in and excluded from political life” (188). Constituting one of several key aspects of the necropolitical order, the production of bare life draws our attention to the ways in which (potential) victims and survivors of femicide and other forms of terror against women become the subject matter of state and civil discourses while simultaneously occupying a position outside the purview of state intervention and accountability.²² Victims and survivors of femicide and anti-female terror become the subject matter of state and popular discourses of blame and mismanaged life, yet remain politically and socially marginalized by framing them as “public women” (e.g., social activists, laborers, and other activities of production, consumption, and leisure in public spaces) and, therefore, not worthy of state or civil intervention thereby excluding women from the body politic. However, by virtue of their “public” visibility, whether as producers of value or consumers of commodities, for example, or as corpses buried throughout the Chihuahua desert or in and around abandoned factory buildings on both sides of the border, female subjectivity is framed and represented in contradictory and paradoxical ways. In other words, female subjectivity takes on a contradictory form as women constitute a vital and principle source of human activity toward state economic development. However, in the very moment of occupying this vital position in state economic development, women are discursively rendered the subjects of political and social scrutiny by both the state and segments of civil society, again, often carried out through representations of individual blame, loss of self-control, mismanaged life, and other formations of “improper” female conduct and behavior.

²² This certainly applies to actors outside state institutions as misogyny and various forms of terror against women are exercised by both men and women in and of “civil society.”

In this section, I want to draw attention to the ways in which the film documentary *Señorita Extraviada* engages with and reconfigures various interpretive discourses related to femicide and disappearance. In doing so, I am interested in the ways in which the film draws a critical connection between “moral” and “globalization” discourses and a neoliberal ethos of prudentialism that often places the onerous of responsibility, read as the security and well-being of one’s self, squarely upon the victims of violence and terror. Furthermore, I am also interested in how this film links in interesting ways to dominant discourses of (individual) blame with visibilities of death in which the brutal murders of women, particularly as these images are disseminated throughout popular media, symbolically resonate throughout the border region communicating a system of fear and terror based on the confluence of patriarchal domination and the exigencies of capital accumulation. For instance, in response to the mounting criticism of the state’s failure to respond to the growing number of crimes committed against women in Ciudad Juárez, Assistant Attorney General for the state of Chihuahua (1992-1998), Jorge López, offers an “interesting solution”: “The community could choose to impose a curfew. All the good people should stay home with their families and let the bad people out on the streets.” While seemingly concise and to the point from the standpoint of traditionally based social conservatism, Mr. López’s “solution” reveals an expressive component of state-sponsored terrorism in which narratives of “public women,” gendered separate spheres, and individual responsabilization intersect in violent ways. The Assistant Attorney General’s “solution” represents a moralizing discourse predicated on a binary logic in which “the good people” by virtue of their adherence to traditionally gendered prescriptions of individual conduct find safety in their homes, domestically enclosed and

shielded from the vice and threat that characterizes “the streets.” And yet, as these women bear the burden of state restructuring during times of violent economic shifts associated with neoliberal economic production and social policy, their very active engagement in wage-labor production necessarily positions them outside the strictures of the home and, more generally, beyond the confines of gendered separate spheres. By virtue of actively engaging in assembly-line production, one that is often framed as the “freedom” to labor rather than as an economic necessity based, among other historical contingencies, on the effects of the neoliberal restructuring, these women are necessarily situated in public spaces as their earnings offer a level of social mobility, however meager compared to advanced capitalist economies. This moralizing discourse also points to the ways in which distinctions between “the good” and “the bad,” between decency and impropriety, and the securitization of one’s self through patriarchal mechanisms of self-discipline and self-management signify the extent to which hyper-individualistic forms of personal safety and social well-being constitute forms of governing endemic to the neoliberal state. In dismissing issues of social inequality and uneven relations of power based on class and gender, the home emerges as the obvious solution through which a domesticity of propriety deflects institutional and social structural problems from critical purview. Moreover, the way in which the Assistant Attorney General’s political “solution” converges with the private, i.e., the affairs of the family and home, points to the how neoliberal governmentality expressed through a “hands off” mode of governing and hyper-individualized responsibility operates coextensively with a discourse of “public women.”²³ With respect to this “hands off”

²³ As Mr. López articulates his “solution” to the public, the film documents in moving panoramic view a

approach characteristic of neoliberal governmentality, Wendy Larner reminds us that “Neoliberalism is both a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals at a distance” (6). This scene, likewise, captures what Pat O’Malley identifies as the logic of neoliberal risk management “whereby individual[s] . . . take rational steps to avoid and to insure against risk . . . in order to be independent rather than a burden on others” (200). Neoliberal risk management and responsabilization, I argue, dovetail in crucial ways with discourses of “public women” that, on the one hand, relieve or, at least, attempt to roll-back government responsibility and obligation while, on the other, reproduce the very conditions of social crises that continue to maintain power over segments of the population.²⁴

Consistent with narratives of blame and mismanaged life, the victims of violence are commonly portrayed by governmental discourses as either unable or unwilling to govern themselves and, therefore, burden the state and civil society by virtue of their perceived misconduct. One of the key connections I have been attempting to develop here is the way in which neoliberal discourses of mismanaged life and neoliberal governmentality in the form of governing at a distance (the so-called “hands-off” approach) intersect with

crowded public square with hanging political banners of what appear to be (male) political candidates up for election.

²⁴ Consistent with narratives of blame and mismanaged life, the victims of violence are portrayed as either unable or unwilling to govern themselves and, therefore, burden the state and civil society by putting themselves in harm’s way. One of the key connections I have been attempting to develop here is the way in which neoliberal discourses of mismanaged life and neoliberal governmentality in the form of governing at a distance (the so-called “hands-off” approach) intersect with moral discourses of blame that Fregoso critiques. I would argue that the incapacity or unwillingness of the state to intervene on behalf of the victims and their families constitutes an important element or dimension of the necropolitical order of power, particularly through the technology of impunity. It comes as no surprise or as a coincidence that impunity emerges at roughly the same historical moment in which neoliberal political rationalities become more entrenched in developing economies experiencing economic shocks and social transformations under global capitalism.

moral discourses of blame. The ways in which *Señorita Extraviada* draws attention to the “uncanny incapacity” of the state, to borrow from Geraldine Pratt, constitutes an important representational strategy that brings into greater focus a key element or dimension of the necropolitical order of power, a state-sponsored form of gendered terror exercised through the necropolitical technology of impunity.²⁵

Lastly, the film addresses another important issue regarding Mr. López’s “solution,” namely the notion of a self-imposed curfew as a tenable alternative policy in addressing femicide and disappearance. The notion of a self-imposed curfew offered by the Assistant Attorney General raises three important points. Firstly, by virtue of recommending a voluntary, self-imposed curfew enacted by “the people,” the government effectively acknowledges the existence of a social crisis in which a public “call to action” in the form of a self-imposed curfew (as self-imposed discipline and surveillance) emerges as a declaration of emergency. And while some may interpret the Assistant Attorney General’s recommendation as a facetious display of governmental hubris or “bad taste,” the mannerisms and tone of language displayed on the screen appear to contradict this claim. Secondly, by virtue of granting “the people” the power of declaration, the government, under the figure of popular sovereignty, and one consistent with the notion of governing from a distance, has taken steps to deflect critical attention away from the institutional structures fostering the conditions of possibility for femicide and anti-female terror. Thirdly, the scene offers a nuanced representation of

²⁵ It is no coincidence that impunity for the murder of hundreds of women along the borderlands emerges at roughly the same historical moment in which neoliberal political rationalities become more entrenched in the developing economies of Mexico’s northern states. It is roughly during this period that border cities like Ciudad Juarez begin to experience violent economic shocks and social transformations represented in the texts examined in this study.

what we might refer to as an internalized carceral space where citizens of the state impose Draconian measures upon themselves. Rather than addressing the historical contingencies fundamental to any understanding of social problems associated with the “streets,” reform in this particular context constitutes the containment of the mobility of women in and out of public spaces. Whether deemed “good” or “bad,” the victims are either politically excluded (contained within domesticated, private spaces) or abandoned to the margins of society (the “streets” characterized as spaces of vice and depravity). In either case, ironically, the spatialities of exclusion operate in spaces ostensibly diametrically opposed to one another—the home and the “streets.”

One of the ways in which *Señorita Extraviada* represents the containment, discipline, and surveillance of women is through over-powering images of male authority. While the next chapter discusses the damaging effects of over-powering images of female victimization and disempowerment and the ways in which marginalized communities come to resist such over-powering images and myths of disposability, here we view the films’ visual and auditory construction of male authority and its relationship to the climate of impunity underwriting femicide. In contesting over-powering images of patriarchy and female submissiveness, the documentary offers a critical assessment of the mechanisms of discipline and control by destabilizing and challenging normative conceptions of institutionally sponsored male power, whether at the level of government, the workplace, or the home.

The following scene features activist Judith Galarza from the Latin American Federation Families of the Disappeared. The importance of the term “disappeared” draws historical connections between femicide along the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso border

region and the history of state-sponsored violence and terror upon numerous subaltern groups across the Americas.²⁶ The connection between these forms of state-sponsored terror and the killings and disappearance of women in Ciudad Juárez, while under quite different socio-historical contexts, nonetheless, underscores the intersecting economic, political, and cultural forces shaping these forms of violence and resistance.

In this scene, Galarza's critique of the state in tandem with the visual images captured on film carefully reconstructs a critique of impunity that merges cultural forms of domination with the power of the state. "Neither political party [PRI and PAN]²⁷," she argues, "has solved this problem. Instead, they contributed to increase the violence against women, from the moment they said we were out at night and dressed provocatively. They blamed women and the murders increased." As Galarza continues talking about the Mexican state's involvement with the crimes, an image of a globe divided in three vertical sections with each of the letters PRI imprinted upon it dominates the screen. Underneath the image of the globe, however, appears two hands cupped together gently supporting the tri-colored globe with "PRI" inscribed upon it. In a skillfully rendered visual sequence that parodies state produced discourses of national cohesion and security, social and political inclusion, and, to borrow from Foucault, the fostering of life of the nation, the camera focuses on a particular section of an advertising billboard bearing the image of the aforementioned globe. The realities of state-sponsored

²⁶ More specifically, the term "disappeared" holds historical significance as it draws connections between the targeting of mostly poor, racialized, young women in Cd. Juárez and the "dirty wars" of state-sponsored terror in Argentina, for example, from the mid-1970s up to 1983 and the Central American civil wars throughout the 1980s that unleashed a reign of state-sponsored terror against mostly indigenous populations backed by the support of the Reagan Administration.

²⁷ Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party) and Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party).

terror against women articulated in her critique defy the intended message portrayed by the image on the billboard. Juxtaposed to this image is the following campaign message: “Por México. Unidos Somos Los PRimeros.” The camera, then, slowly pans to the right as an image of three male party members shaking hands comes into sharper focus. The film’s skilful combination of oral narrative and visual close-up produces a complex representation of the political rhetoric deployed in not only promoting national unity but re-inscribing male authority and benevolent paternalism. The combination of sound (Galarza’s critique) and image (the “hands” at work) carefully reconstructs a complex narrative that captures the moment in which the “deal is sealed,” so to speak, symbolized in the handshake that is eerily reminiscent of the classic “*gentlemen’s agreement*.” In this public display of male power performed upon the billboard, political male authority operates in the service of erasing female subjectivity and political agency. In re-iterating male dominance of the body politic, *de facto* exclusion of women from the polis and political realm constitute a form of social and political exclusion and abandonment in which an “entire category of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (Agamben quoted in Pratt, 1054). This rendering of women outside the political process registers the ways in which the film touches upon the processes of political abandonment experienced by certain subjects of the state. Yet, as Geraldine Pratt reminds us, abandonment is not simply equivalent or identical to exclusion, but rather a more complex relation in which “[t]he difference between exclusion and abandonment turns on the fact that abandonment is an active, relational process.” “The one who is abandoned,” she adds, “remains in a relation with sovereign power: included through exclusion” (1054). Interestingly, when viewing this documentary with English

subtitles, at the moment in which the camera zooms in on the “gentlemen’s handshake,” the following words appear on the screen: “...and dressed provocatively.” The term “provocatively” is quite indicative and invocative of nostalgic appeals to traditional (read patriarchal) forms of appropriate female conduct, including gendered familial relations within and outside the home. What is also interesting in this scene is the way in which the provocative attire, posture, and attitude of the male politicians link to femicide. While Galarza uses the term to signify the absurdity of the discourse of blame deployed by governmental authorities in order to hold the victims responsible for their own suffering, it also delivers an effective counter-narrative that challenges this system of patriarchy that enables the proliferation of violence against women. Portillo reminds us that violence against women, to borrow from Fregoso, “is not simply a problem for the state, but is in fact endemic to it” (144).

In the following discussion, I draw from Suvendrini Perera’s analysis of the contradictory and paradoxical relationship between inhabitants of Australian detention camps and the state’s ever increasing control of those inhabiting the camps by virtue of their exclusion from the polity.²⁸ This paradoxical relationship is symptomatic of the violent caesura separating politically invested subjects from denationalized subjects. It is Perera’s concept of the structure of the camp as a “dislocating localization” that informs our analysis of two distinct but related scenes from *Señorita Extraviada*. Before moving to these scenes from the film, let us briefly discuss Perera’s concept of the structure of the camp as a “dislocating localization.”

²⁸ Perera analyzes the Woomera Detention Center as a space deemed to have no claim on the nation.

The structure of the camp as a “dislocating localization,” according to Perera, emerges as a socio-political space in which legal rights and social protections are placed in indefinite suspension. While Perera’s analysis of the camp is specifically situated in the post-9/11 Australian political context, the concept of “dislocating localization” offers a useful lens for analyzing the ways in which denationalization and, by extension, political and social abandonment in the context of femicide and anti-female terror along the “maquila complex” operates as a mechanism of displacement and dispossession as particular spaces and segments of the population are situated, both materially and symbolically, outside of the polity. Moreover, while no formal declaration of the suspension of legal rights exists, the failure of the state to intervene on behalf of the victims and their families, whether through incompetence or indifference, constitutes a *de facto* suspension of legal rights and social protections of the citizens of the state. As spatial configurations of containment, discipline, and surveillance, the squatter colonies and cartolandia, in ways similar to the camp, constitute spaces of social and political exclusion, a site that both literally and figuratively relocates the citizen outside the realm of constitutionally guaranteed rights and protections. However, it is important to emphasize the term “localization” vis-à-vis “locality” in order to draw attention to the camp as a political formation and an organizing spatial mechanism that reproduces something akin to a state of exception, the production of bare life, and political and social abandonment as the conditions of its existence. This paradoxical maneuver is characterized by Agamben as a zone of indistinction in which certain state-subjects are suspended outside the juridical-political realm of the state while simultaneously constituting the subjects of the state by virtue of (inclusive) exclusion from the polity as

targets of power of the state and civil society. The following scenes from *Señorita Extraviada* draws attention to the socio-spatial configuration of the camp by focusing on the ways in which subaltern peoples living in squatter colonies and cartolandia along the “maquila complex” are consigned to spaces of social and political abandonment and dispossession.

The scene begins with the image of a male street vender cycling a *mariscos* cart along an unpaved, inclined road. Immediately, we are struck by the man’s facial expression that tells of the daily struggle and toil of survival in this part of the city. And as the camera establishes a close up of the street vender’s face, a woman’s voice enters: “My husband and I were home. We have some neighbors who wanted to take our land.” At this particular moment in the film, the camera pans across the inside of a modest house, presumably the home of the couple featured in the scene. “They started to beat him,” she continues, “I tried to get them off him. I told my son, ‘Go get the police.’ They took us to the station and detained us.” While the narrative provides no information as to the details of their detention, it certainly raises the question about the real level of economic scarcity shaping social relations, particularly in the context of the numerous shanty-towns and *colonias* scattered alongside and throughout the “maquila complex.” Unable to pay 250 pesos for their release, the couple remained in detention for twenty-four hours. According to the woman’s testimonial, she was in the care of a female officer who allegedly forced her to undress. Having resisted the female officer’s sexual advances, a male officer enters the scene as the female officer violently assaults the woman. She describes what followed:

“Anything happen?” he asked her.

And the woman [officer] said, “This whore wouldn’t do it.”
 “My God,” I thought , “they all know what goes on.”
 I didn’t hear the male officer come in.
 He cornered me and said, “I like you very much.”
 He took me as if . . . as if he were doing . . . as if he were crazy.
 He raped me, abused me . . . like a savage.

Her testimonial is significant in several important ways. Firstly, it denotes an explicit form of gendered violence as the “detainee” is reduced to a sexualized object with no legal rights within this specific juridico-political space. The contradiction between this spatially designated zone of legality and her presumed non-legal status is quite apparent in this scene. What might appear less obvious, which brings us to our second point, is the subtle yet telling sense of shock and disbelief in her voice. Disbelief and shock register the exceptional nature of this crime, one that suggests a sense of the impossible and the unintelligible nature of such a crime in this specific legal and political context. Yet, it is precisely the unthinkable nature of this crime that speaks to the way in which the community is not so easily reduced to the status of the camp. The unintelligible nature of the crime captured in this seemingly straightforward yet emotionally charged narrative suggests an expectation of legal rights and social protection guaranteed by the state. Lastly, as this scene would imply, we cannot simply characterize this assault as the exception to the norm, that is to say, in terms of a social anomaly easily explained as individual acts of crime. The shocking discovery of this network of violence (“My God, they all know what goes on.”) points to how this particular tragic event is symptomatic of state-sponsored violence against poor women and how this system of terror may, but not always, take the form of the camp. Furthermore, her testimonial speaks of the way in which economic poverty can often translate into the suspension legal rights, political

disfranchisement, and social abandonment captured in the paradoxical figure of the “denationalized subject.” We should also note that the woman’s testimonial draws attention to the female officer’s role in this gendered system of terror. While not to the extent to which *Desert Blood* challenges the binary logic of male/female violence, *Señorita Extraviada* nonetheless addresses the pivotal role that women play in the reproduction of violence against other racialized, poor women. This scene, in effect, draws attention to the paradoxical nature of the erasure of legal status and social value within the very juridical-political space meant to symbolize and function as the guarantor of citizen rights and protections.

The following scene draws a more explicit relationship between femicide and disappearance *and* police brutality and state-sponsored terror against women. She continues her testimonial: “They took me to a cell hidden near the kitchen. I looked around and saw women’s clothing . . . panties, bras, dresses strewn about as if it were a garbage dump.” Her description of the police station *cum* detention camp eerily resonates with images and narratives of cadavers in tattered clothing discovered buried throughout the Chihuahua desert. Women’s undergarments and apparel strewn about on the floor of the detention camp raise haunting images of the femicide “dumping grounds” in such notorious places like *Lomas de Poleo* where many missing women have been discovered discarded beneath the desert sand and mounds of waste. In the latter half of the scene, we learn that after being released from jail, the “Devil” makes a visit outside the couple’s home. Describing the “Devil” as a shadowy figure with pistol in hand, she then suggests that even as she and her husband are released from the terror of the police station/detention camp, fear and anxiety continue to haunt them as the “Devil” releases

two gunshots to the sky. Frightened and fearful of the safety of her family, the woman yells to the “Devil,” “I’ll run and get the police!” However, as she reflects upon her words and the empty force of her threat, she tells us that “the police are one and the same.” The futility of her threat is even further accentuated as she describes how the man enters his car and confidently speeds away. Lastly, the scene draws attention to the ways in which the spatialities and visibilities of violence and exposure to death emerge through a spectacle and symbolic performance of power that, as Ahmetbeyzade and Fregoso remind us, attempt to incite silence that cripple peoples’ capacity to resist.

Continuing our analysis of the cultural politics of death and the wars of interpretation over the meanings of femicide and disappearance, we now look at several scenes from the novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* by cultural critic, poet, and novelist Alicia Gaspar de Alba. *Desert Blood* is set within the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso border region during the mid- to late-1990s in which over a hundred mutilated bodies have been discovered along the surrounding Chihuahua desert of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The novel draws attention to the increasing violence against racialized, poor, young women and the impunity that maintains and fosters this violent system of misogyny by imaginatively reconfiguring the effects of economic globalization and neoliberal governmentality and how neoliberal globalization intersects with and appropriates this particular form of patriarchy, gendered violence, and classism along both sides of the international border. Protagonist Ivon Villa, a queer Chicana academic and El Paso native who, on a return flight home to adopt a baby from a chronically ill, pregnant *maquiladora* worker in Ciudad Juárez, learns of the killings and disappearance while reading an article from the popular magazine *Ms.* However, Ivon becomes intimately connected to the killings and

disappearance of women along the border when her sister, Irene, also an El Paso native, is kidnapped while attending a carnival in Ciudad Juárez. Impatient and frustrated by unresponsive and ineffectual governmental agencies on both sides of the border, Ivon decides to conduct her own investigation, with the help of her cousins, Ximena and William, and Ximena's friend and partner in illicit transnational adoption, Father Francis, into the disappearance of her younger sister. As she continues her investigation, Ivon moves closer to this network of violence and learns of the complex and intersecting matrix of social, political, economic, and cultural forces underwriting femicide and disappearance in this border region.

As Ivon navigates through a complex labyrinth of terror, power, and profit linking neoliberalism and necropolitics with femicide, the novel imaginatively interrogates the material and ideological conditions of possibility for the killings and climate of impunity surrounding the crimes that implicate numerous institutions and state agencies ranging from the Maquiladora Association, the U.S. Border Patrol, Narco-trafficking organizations, Mexican and U.S. state and local governmental agencies, and segments of the population on both sides of the border directly involved or complicit with the crimes. While the story ends happily with the discovery of Ivon's sister, Irene, whose violent captivity came at the hands of both male and female members of a bi-national pornographic-snuff-video crime syndicate located on the U.S. side of the border at the abandoned ARSCO plant in El Paso, Texas, the narrative leaves readers with an overwhelming sense of the broad, intricate overlapping and intersecting political, economic, and social forces underwriting the crimes and disappearances. An array of related and overlapping issues dealing with free trade, labor exploitation, gendered

surveillance and discipline, border enforcement and immigration policing, and an illicit, underground economy are but several aspects of this complex network of terror.²⁹

In the following scene, Ivon and her cousin, Ximena, discuss the air of silence and climate of impunity surrounding feminicide and disappearance that, according to these two characters from the novel, are maintained by both governmental indifference and scanty news coverage, particularly along the U.S. region of the border.

[Ximena:] “*Ms. magazine*, huh? Well, it’s about time somebody covered these crimes. Other than those stupid little newsbytes they publish in the *El Paso Times*, nobody’s interested. People think of it as Juárez news, not El Paso news, like the two cities weren’t fucking Siamese twins . . .” (23).

The narrative raises an important and often forgotten point, namely the inextricable political, economic, and cultural connections that complicate fixed and rigid notions of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso existing as mutually exclusive, insulated border cities. While the novel points to the ways in which the border functions imaginatively as a liminal space of identification, particularly with respect to hyper-nationalized identities that essentialize differences between people living just north or south of the international border, she also suggests how the flow of goods, services, and capital render this border selectively permeable and highly porous. The figure of the “Siamese twin” is an interesting metaphor in that it signifies an economic syncretism and social and cultural symbiosis between these two border cities. That feminicide, disappearance, and anti-female terror become essentialized cultural markers of Ciudad Juárez and the

²⁹ Near the end of the novel, Gaspar de Alba paints a graphic image of this complex network: “[Ivon] saw the order of the cards, now. The threat that pregnancy posed to ‘free trade’ revenue. The heavy policing of female reproductive power in the maquiladoras to safeguard that revenue. . . The overt sexualization of the bodies. . . The use of the Internet as a worldwide market for these same organs in easily accessible tourist sites and affordable online pornography. . . A bilateral assembly line of perpetrators, from the actual agents of the crime to the law enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and agreements. The cards fell so perfectly into place, it was almost nauseating” (333, 335).

borderlands, more generally, speaks of the kinds of reified images and conception of the “northern other” that popular representations produce that often elide, obscure, or ignore the historical contingencies overdetermining the social and ecological environments of many border cities and towns along the borderlands.

Throughout the novel, Gaspar de Alba crafts a deceptively straightforward, linear narrative in which certain everyday objects are imbued with historical reference, meaning, and significance. Often the grumbling sound of a lumbering train and the high pitched cry of its horn moving across the border, the ominous ASARCO smoke stacks dominating the border skyline, or the names and the geographical layout of highways and roads weaving across the border landscape invoke historical meaning and significance, particularly as it relates to the inextricable political, economic, and cultural relationship shared by these two border towns. While Fregoso is correct in pointing out the limits and dangers associated with globalization discourses, we must nevertheless attend to the ways in which economic globalization and neoliberal social policy intersect with local socio-economic and political phenomena. As Irene Mata argues, “By limiting the maquiladora industry within the larger structure of state-motivated globalization projects—projects that have drastically altered the material and social conditions of Juárez—the state becomes directly implicated in the exploitation and oppression of its people . . . where multiple forms of both local and global oppression come together” (22). It is to this notion of the confluence of local and global forces that Ximena’s notion of the “Siamese Twin” deserves attention.

“Ximena made a sharp left onto La Ribereña, the long boulevard that parallels the Rio Grande and leads to the Córdoba Bridge. “And that doesn’t even include the ones who’ve gone missing. We’re talking

hundreds more. And some of them—I bet this wasn't in the article you read, since it's a big secret—are American girls from El Paso and Las Cruces.”

“Chicanas?”

“Mostly, yeah. Same profile. . .” (23)

I want to draw attention to the careful use of diction in this deceptively simple narrative passage. I am particularly interested in three important terms from the first sentence that, I argue, complicate essentialized, binary accounts of the border that continue to reproduce mutually exclusive notions of these two border towns—“La Ribereña,” “Rio Grande,” and the transitive verb “parallels.” All three terms work together to underscore the social and (geo)political constructedness of the border, one that too easily slips into an a-historicized, monolithic narrative that not only dangerously obscures the longer dynamic and violent history between Mexico and the United States, but one that erases or elides important socio-economic and cultural linkages and negotiations occurring among communities living and working along both sides of the border. The Spanish terms “La Ribereña” and “Rio Grande” make reference to the international border in terms of its ecological and geographical dimensions. In other words, by making reference to the international border through the term “Rio Grande,” the narrative highlights and draws attention on the geographical point of contiguity that binds these two nations. Likewise, the Spanish term “ribereña” denotes that which is related to or situated alongside the bank of a river. And while “La Ribereña” marks the “long boulevard” running parallel to the Rio Grande, it is in conjunction with the use of the transitive verb “parallels” through which this short and seemingly straightforward passage delivers its most significant meaning. The infinitive “to parallel” denotes correspondence or similarity between two

or more things.³⁰ It is precisely the notion of parallelism that reconstructs a mental image of correspondence and contiguity between these two ostensibly, but, nonetheless, very real discrete national spaces. In other words, the sentence offers a visual rendering of the spatial contiguity and historical relatedness that characterize both Ciudad Juárez and El Paso in this novel. This is not to suggest that both cities are identical politically, economically, socially, or culturally, though they certainly exhibit some resemblances and forms of hybridity due to cultural interaction in this specific contact zone. What I want to emphasize, however, is the inextricable historical relationship that affect social and cultural transformations, especially as it pertains to femicide and anti-female terror and the cultural politics of death and wars of interpretation that construct meanings surrounding the crimes. While fences, bridges, and immigration checkpoints come to symbolize the more readily apparent social and political divisions between the two cities, it is the river in this passage that skillfully bridges both sides of the border, and, with that, the shared fate of these two border cities. In the process of constructing the idea of geographical contiguity and shared history, the passage then challenges essentialized notions of femicide as an exclusively Mexican or Juárez problem. Consistent with the concept of the twin cities or, as Ximena puts it, the figure of the “Siamese twins,” femicide constitutes a transnational phenomenon that includes racialized, working-class women from El Paso, Texas, and Las Cruces, New Mexico, among other border towns. As Ximena makes clear to Ivon, Chicanas and Latinas living on the northern side of the border are not immune from femicide and disappearance, although, as she correctly

³⁰ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the transitive verb “parallel” denotes “plac[ing] . . . beside another mentally, so as to show a similarity between them; to exhibit an analogy between (two or more things); to represent as similar or corresponding (to)” (OED 2012).

observes, mainstream representations and popular discourse from both sides of the border often frame the crimes as exclusively related to Mexican society and culture.

Continuing with this discussion of popular representations of feminicide, I am especially interested in how the novel engages with media representations of feminicide and the ways in which civil society on both sides of the border are complicit with crime and violence against women.

My friend, the priest [Father Francis] who's coming with us tomorrow, he's formed a nonprofit on this side. *Contra el Silencio*, it's called, and once a month, the group organizes a *rastreo* over here . . ."

"A what?"

"*Rastreo*. Means body search. They're looking for bodies."

"Isn't that a little morbid?"

"I know, but what're you gonna do? The police aren't looking for them, so it's mostly families and friends of the missing girls who go out and walk the desert . . ."

Ximena took a swig of water out of her water bottle. "Police are pissed as hell. They say we're trampling crime scenes and messing with the evidence, but the truth is, folks have taken matters into their own hands because the supposed task force they set up to investigate the murders—they're a bunch of assholes. Treat the families like shit. And a lot of the girls don't even have families here. They're called *muchachas del sur* because so many of them come from small towns and villages in the south."

Ivon shivered and rolled up the windows. She didn't know what to say. (23-24)

Geraldine Pratt's concept of the "uncanny incapacity" of social and political institutions "to regulate and police certain types of violence and illegal behavior" (1052) offers a useful framework in thinking about the maquila complex in relation to socio-political abandonment and *de facto* suspension of law. While Pratt's analysis of social and political abandonment emerges out the context of increasing crimes committed against

women in contemporary Vancouver, Canada, femicide along the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso border region exhibits a similar “uncanny incapacity” to regulate and police various forms of violence against women characterized by “absences and lapses in state policing and regulation in particular spaces of the city” (1052).

Ahmetbeyzade’s analysis of the spectacle of honor killings offers some critical insights to the ways in which *Señorita Extraviada* and *Desert Blood* imaginatively configure the visibility and spatialities of death of gendered necropolitics. “Spectators,” argues Ahmetbeyzade, “form a visible social unit” in which the visible unit functions as a means of disseminating knowledge and fear throughout the community as “seeing eyes and talking lips pass around the community all information in sufficient details” (190). Speculation about the details and possible causes of the killings often communicates a form of domination over the region that incites silence and fear throughout the community. In discussing the various competing explanatory discourses on femicide, Fregoso reminds us that

the meanings surrounding the deaths are elusive. . . There are so many contrary interpretations and competing narratives that they have created a ‘problem of interpretation’ that is ‘decisive for terror’ . . . It is thus important to recognize how violence . . . [and] a ‘state of exception’ produced by an authoritarian government . . . has cultivated extreme forms of violence, corruption, and yes, even death, in order to cripple people’s capacity to resist” (“Toward a Planetary Civil Society,” 19).

As a mechanism of governing that disseminates fear and terror among targeted members of society, “[t]he process of killing in the name of honor,” writes Ahmetbeyzade, “also serves as a long-lasting necropolitical strategy to reproduce the terror of death” (191). Although Fregoso and Ahmetbeyzade arrive at similar conclusions from quite distinct and different contexts, they raise important points that inform our discussion of *Señorita*

Extraviada and *Desert Blood*. Firstly, the spectacle of terror, either witnessed by members of a targeted community or exposed to images and narratives of femicide, constitutes a mechanism of governing in which the micromanagement and the microphysics of necropower are reproduced throughout society. For instance, while sensational journalistic accounts on both sides of the border often serve as entertainment pieces designed to produce or capture readers' appetite for the grotesque, the fantastic, or the horrific, they often provide a secondary effect by instilling fear among women and their families. Secondly, this spectacle of terror that invoke anxieties and fear derives in large part from the ways in which these images and narratives get framed. In other words, its disciplinary effect is largely predicated on the use of language and framing of images. Lastly, the dissemination of images and narratives of violated bodies and decomposing corpses has lasting effects as the invocation of fear, silence, and compliance become the norm. As such, the discipline and surveillance of women's bodies becomes normalized in preserving a patriarchal order or, as Ahmetbeyzade poignantly phrases it, "patriarchal capital" (189) that constitute the very conditions of exceptionality and make possible the *de facto* suspension of the rights and mobility of women.

Lastly, we turn our attention to the importance of the *rastreo*³¹ not only as a form of collective agency on the part of marginalized peoples, but also as a symptom of the kind of "uncanny incapacity" associated with impunity and abandonment as technologies of governing. In the novel, several institutions embody this "uncanny incapacity," namely

³¹ The Spanish term "rastreo" translates in English to the notion or concept of "investigation," "exploration," or "hunt" in which, in the case of femicide, denotes an organized group of family members, friends, activists, and other members of the community that volunteer their time and energy to find the disappeared that are feared to be victims of femicide. Their activism speaks volumes of the incapacity of the government to deal honestly and efficiently with this form of violence directly related to patriarchy, class disparities, and racialization creating the conditions of possibility for these crimes.

the state, the media, and civil society. While certainly violence and terror are shaped by political economic forces, cultural factors play a crucial role in maintaining uneven relations of power based on differences of gender, race, and class. As a “dislocating dislocation” where citizen rights and protections are placed in suspension and citizens are exposed to the conditions of possibility reproducing social and political abandonment, the novel imaginatively reconfigures the ways in which governmental agencies and public/popular institutions have effectively implemented *de facto* suspensions through acts of denial, blame, indifference, or incompetence. However one may be inclined to describe this breakdown in protection, the notion of the “uncanny incapacity” of the state and society to protect its citizens aptly describes this frustrating and puzzling set of circumstances.

Impunity, as I have attempted to demonstrate, emerges in these textual representations as a technology of government or governing that allows the state to retreat from its obligations and responsibilities while simultaneously operating as a technology of social control and population management. As such, impunity also functions as technology of security, one that does not simply operate in times of crisis, but rather one that produces social crises as the very condition of its existence. As a technology of security, impunity in effect reproduces enforced exclusion through the production of spaces of abandonment that include “forms of segregation, [im]migration, and interment” (Perera, 5). These texts imaginatively (re)configure forms of racialized, gendered confinement and separation through representations of denationalization as denationalized incarceration. Moreover, these texts effectively construct critical representations of the neoliberal punishing state as the responsibility of upholding constitutionally guaranteed rights and protections

increasingly falls on families, friends, private charities, or transnational NGOs. In looking at how these texts imaginatively configure the spatialities of death and the production and dissemination of discourses of blame, mismanaged life, or what Graham Burchell calls the neoliberal discourse of “responsibilization”, we know turn our attention to how such discourses link in crucial ways to narratives and images of disposability and human waste, or, to borrow from Melissa Wright, how the idea that women “both within and beyond factory walls” constitute what she calls “the myth of the disposable third world woman” (1).

Chapter 2

“Reification, Disposability, and Resistance”

Drawing from the Marxist concept of reification, this chapter looks at the ways in which the documentary films *Señorita Extraviada* (2001) and *Maquilapolis* (2006) and the novel *Desert Blood: the Juárez Murders* (2005) represent the complex and often concealed relationship between reified social relations and violence against women along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. As both Rosemary Hennessy and Moishe Postone remind us, reification constitutes “a logic that binds ways of knowing and forms of identity” and, as a dominant cultural logic, “remain[s] bound to the forms of appearance of capitalist social relations, thereby hypostatizing or naturalizing those social relations,” which, according to Marx, gains an objective reality (Hennessy and Postone quoted in González, 10-11). This chapter attempts to look at these texts primarily through the Marxist concept of reification in order to draw out the ways in which these texts imaginatively represent violence against women beyond immediate circumstances and towards a more complex, nuanced, and, at times, contradictory narrative that engages with the historicized gender, racial, and class dimensions of femicide and anti-female terror.

However, before analyzing the texts, I want to briefly touch upon the concept of reification and how it might inform our analysis of the texts. This chapter draws from Alicia Schmidt Camacho’s and Marcial González’s conceptualization and reworking of the Marxist concept of reification. In her critique of the reproduction of reified images of femicide as disposable, wasted humanity, Schmidt Camacho offers a very insightful and extremely useful definition of reification for our analysis. Reification, according to Schmidt Camacho, constitutes “a *technique of representation* linked to new modes of

social control in which the image serves to make a given social order or cultural practice appear normal, inevitable, and fixed” (emphasis added, 41). I want to draw attention to the notion of reification as that which constitutes “a technique of representation.” When looking at reification as a technique of representation, particularly as one inextricably caught up in the “wars of interpretation” over cultural representations of feminicide, it becomes a useful framework for looking at the ways in which the documentaries and the novel challenge and, in some instances, collude with the given social order of cultural practices as natural and self-evident *and* feminicide as some inevitable outcome of industrialized modernization. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which the documentaries and the novel challenge how reification obscures or erases the historically contingent nature of feminicide. In drawing attention to reification, this chapter attempts to offer a critical space for interrogating the complex and intersecting socio-economic and cultural forces underwriting continued violence against mostly poor, racialized women. As will become more evident throughout this chapter, the elision or erasure of the contingent nature of reified identities, subjectivities, and social relations emerges as one of the more critical issues with which these texts engage.

In his outstanding and timely critique of race, class, and reification represented in the Chicana/o novel, Marcial González offers an insightful reworking of the Marxist concept of reification, one that remains grounded on Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism and processes of objectification while also broadening the concept to include the social and political rationalities under late-capitalism that, in my opinion, intersect in interesting ways with the emerging literature on neoliberal governmentality. González informs our analysis of the representations of feminicide by offering several related ways of

understanding reification. While emphasizing the valuable contribution that reification as a critical perspective still holds for helping us understand contemporary processes and forms of ossification and thing-ification, González's reworking of the term offers a useful lens for analyzing the various social and cultural permutations of reification represented in the aforementioned texts.

[R]eification can also be understood in other related ways: the shallowness of perception; the naturalizing of social inequalities; the use of immutable or quantifiable laws to explain history; the categorizing of humans according to phenotype and anatomy; the fragmentation and compartmentalization of productive human activity—a development necessitated by the classifying and rationalizing tendencies of a capitalist mode of production; and, most importantly, the manner in which the logic of commodity fetishism has pervaded every aspect of social life under late capitalism, including literary works and consciousness itself. (10)

It is precisely these modes of perception related to naturalized social inequalities, particularly essentialized notions of human subjectivity grounded on differences of race, class, and gender with which these texts engage. For example, the specific way in which *Señorita Extraviada* engages with the logic of commodity fetishism relies on particular representational strategies that deploy the trope of women's shoes. Throughout the film, recurring images of women's shoes circulate within the market place of commodity exchange and across the desert landscape of disposability. Because the texts examined in this chapter emerge from and engage directly with actual historic events along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and treat these events through visual and literary realism, we must address some issues concerning representation. In doing so, I, again, draw from González. Firstly, if we are to assert that reification imposes certain limitations on social relations, then to what extent might these cultural texts overcome or disrupt these limitations? Secondly, given that reification constitutes the process whereby the

historically contingent nature of social inequalities become concealed, how might “the immediacy of [cultural] representation open up access to totality?” And lastly, to what extent, if at all, can these texts effectively contest social reification as “a matter of political agency and empowerment?” (10)

In addressing these questions, our analysis brings to the fore the contradictions and paradoxes emerging from visual and literary representations of femicide, particularly those focusing on mutilated bodies and cadavers. The limits, paradoxes, and contradictions emerging from these representations raises one important question addressed throughout this chapter. In what ways might visual and literary representations of femicide and violence against women transcend reified portrayals of victimization, disempowerment, and the erasure of subjectivity? While documenting the brutalities associated with misogyny certainly constitutes an important move toward social awareness and, therefore, an act of resistance to violence against women, it nonetheless runs into potential limits that point to the tensions between unintended collaboration with processes of social reification and forms of resistance to naturalized, essentialized notions of female subjectivity. In tackling the difficulties that arise from the apparent impossibility of transcending reified images and narratives of victimhood, disempowerment, and loss of subjectivity, Adriana Martínez writes, “On the one hand, there exists an undeniable urgency to uphold this portrayal because of the vast pain inflicted in the Juárez society by the femicides and the overall absence of justice regarding these cases. Nevertheless, when the majority of the representations emphasize the image of women-as-victim, they become forever entrapped as disempowered, voiceless, violated Others” (94). The issue of representational strategy then becomes the

pressing question that ultimately informs our discussion of the ways in which visual and literary representations of femicide either challenge or collaborate (or both challenge and collaborate) with images and narratives that reproduce notions of disempowerment, victimization, and loss of subjectivity.

***Maquilapolis*: Abstract Labor and Social Reification**

In this section, I argue that the documentary film *Maquilapolis* critiques the erasure of subjectivity through carefully constructed representations of social reification, particularly in relation to the production of commodified objects or “things” vis-à-vis sensuous, living beings. Semantic variations of the term “sensuousness” capture the multiple dimensions of fetishism represented in the film. The term “sensuous” contains several important meanings that offer a way of discussing femicide and anti-female terror in relation to commodity fetishism and, by extension, social reification. Sensuous denotes, among other things, (i) that which pertains to the senses or sense-perception, (ii) that which affects the senses, and (iii) forms of devotion to the gratification and pleasure of the senses (OED). In conceptualizing the relationship between social reification and fetishism, we turn to two distinct, but related, forms—commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism. An analysis of commodity fetishism allows for an interpretive explication of the erasure of sensuous, living forms of labor and social relations. Meanwhile, critical attention to representations of hyper-sexualized, objectified women reveals the extent to which sexual fetishism emerges as an important social and cultural force in tandem with social reification toward the reproduction of the conditions of possibility for social and political abandonment. Both forms draw our attention to the ways in which women, as

feeling, thinking, and acting social subjects are reconfigured (and re-presented) as abstracted, de-humanized objects.

The essence of capital's power lies in its ability to function as a normative, universal organizing principle. If we take fetishism to characterize the totality of capitalist social processes, then we must ask to what extent the film configures commodified social relations through images of subjectified commodities and objectified living beings. Describing the social economy of (late) capitalism in terms of recurring processes of fetishism, William Pietz observes,

The very legal and financial categories that establish capital's social reality bring about the fetishized consciousness appropriate to it through what Marx describes as three-level chiasmus between people and things. The most superficial level is that of *personified things* and *reified people*... Marx refers to this whole structure as 'the Trinity Formula': land, labor, and capital (the things that appear to have the personlike power to produce value); landlord, wageworker, capitalist (the reified identities that personify the factors composing capitalist production); and lastly, rent, wages, and profits (the forms of money-capital that mediate among them). This level of *fetishized objects and individuals* is really an expression of the more fundamental level of fetishized relations. . . People are reified in their relations insofar as their negotiations and other interactions must be expressed through the objectivity of the commodity-price system (that is, in the markets for labor, consumer goods, and capital). (emphases added, 148)

I want to address two important points raised by Pietz. Firstly, Marx's rhetorical schema (i.e., chiasmus) reveals the object-mediation logic of fetishized social relations represented in the "Trinity Formula." Reified identities (social subjects) confront things possessing person-like power mediated by money-capital as the materiality of value or the "social substance that appears in material form" (130).³² In this respect, commodity

³² I am referring here to Marx's concept of the "universal equivalent," that mysterious object that functions as the measure by which all commodities are compared and exchanged on the market.

fetishism addresses (i) relations between capital and labor and (ii) relations among workers differentiated and essentialized by various levels of productive labor (assembly workers, supervisors, floor managers, etc.). Additionally, commodity fetishism reaches beyond the shop floor and into the market-place of sellers and buyers/consumers of commodities, whether through exchange of money for labor or for pleasure. The materiality of value under late-capitalism potentially has the effect of inscribing upon the body a monetary price or exchange value and, in doing so, transfiguring the dynamic and sensuous living being (social subject) into a reified object of exchange. This is most evident in the sex-industry where prostitution emerges as a form of labor linked to Necessity insofar as it constitutes a form of socio-economic constraint in which the exchange of money for pleasure, from the perspective of the seller, is an exchange of pleasure for survival in the context of social exclusion and political abandonment. It is worth noting that in the act of survival, the selling of one's body for money reproduces the notion of the body as an object of consumption. This is not to deny the act of survival as a form of agency or form of resistance against violent inequality, but rather to signal how in the act of survival and resistance reification nonetheless rears its ugly presence. Secondly, Pietz's notion of fetishized objects and people as the expression of a more fundamental level of fetishized social relations points us in the direction of social reification. If social negotiations and interactions are "expressed through the objectivity of the commodity-price system," then the reduction of women as sexualized objects or as the abstract producers of commodities rest on a reified conception of human subjectivity in which the specific, concrete and complex identities and personal histories of potential and actual victims evaporate (or "melt") into thin air. The "sensuous," not as sexualized

objectification but in terms of Marx's theory of the sensuous that manifests in a plurality of ways (thinking, feeling, wanting, creating, acting, loving, and, yes, hurting, for example) gets emptied out, erased, leaving behind a socially vacated body, both symbolically and literally, bearing the inscription of commodity value, whether in the form of abstracted labor or an object of consumption. As I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter when analyzing *Señorita Extraviada*, the concept of commodity fetishism registers the ways in which violence against women remain obscured or elided "behind the equality of market exchange" (Kennedy, 108).

In interrogating the social character of commodity fetishism and the apparent magical qualities of the commodity, Marx illustrates how the "hands" and "heads" of laborers are severed as the products of labor are intimately connected to money as the universal exchange in the market-place. As the value of commodities increasingly inheres in the object through the erasure of real labor expended to produce the object, the logic of the market-place bleeds into what Wendy Brown describes in the neoliberal context as the construction and interpellation of individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of social life (42-43). During the next few pages, I want to pick up on what Marx describes as the "finished form of the world of commodities...which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers" (168-69).

Maquilapolis documents the lives of maquila *obreras* working in Tijuana, Mexico during the early- and mid-2000s. In collaboration with the filmmakers, several *obreras* record their lives which offer an intimate video diary of their living and working conditions, one that brings to light the sociological and ecological environments produced in large part by the maquiladora industry, specifically, and neoliberal capitalism, in

general. As one of the activist-workers (*promotora*) featured in the documentary makes clear, “I make objects and to the factory managers I myself am only an object, a replaceable part of the production process...I don’t want to be an object. I want to be a person.”³³ We might add that this objectification and alienation of the laborer extends beyond the shop floor as owners, investors, governmental agents, and members of civil society likewise constitute objectified, alienated subjects under this regime of production. In the context of this form of social reification, the actual conditions of production and social relations recede to the margins and outside the purview of mainstream social and political discourse. In order to appreciate the representational (re)configuration of the “relations of production [that] assume a material shape . . . [seemingly] independent of their control” (Marx, 187) in this documentary, let us turn to the film’s opening scenes.

In Chapter One: “Bienvenidos a Tijuana,” we are met by Carmen Durán, a maquiladora worker (*obrero*), as she begins filming inside the shop floor of a maquiladora plant (*maquila*).³⁴ As the camera captures the sound and sight of machinery, workers, and a panoramic view of the austere, grey interior, Carmen speaks to the camera: “My name is Carmen Durán. I am a ‘maquiladora’ worker. I have worked in nine assembly plants. I was 13 years old when I arrived in Tijuana. I was alone . . . and I decided to stay.” This frank and unembellished personal account of the history of her arrival to Tijuana, Mexico, and her numerous job relocations within the maquila industry offers an intimate account of the material conditions of survival under contemporary

³³ This *promotora* expresses what Marx refers to as “alienation.” In her specific context, assembly-line production represents the reiterative process whereby the laborer is made to feel foreign and alien to the products of her own labor.

³⁴ As the documentary points out, Carmen works in one of approximately eight-hundred maquiladoras in Tijuana. She represents one of millions working for poverty wages in transnational factories globally.

export-manufacturing in border cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. However, her direct, yet subtle, personal account likewise raises important questions related to the socio-economic factors behind her migration to Tijuana and the numerous lateral job relocations suffered under the context of transnational export processing along the U.S.-Mexico border. From where did she migrate? Under what material conditions was she compelled to migrate to Tijuana? Why at the age of thirteen? Under what material conditions did her nine job relocations occur? Did any of these job relocations entail upward labor mobility and status? Or do they reflect labor insecurity associated with “just in time” production? As this chapter suggests, it is precisely through highly choreographed performances of the labor process that these women draw attention to the material and ideological conditions of labor and social life. Through such performances, the *obreras/promotoras* reveal the operations of export-oriented labor that are often safely concealed within the highly securitized confines of the maquiladora plant. Equally important, it is through such performances that the disparities in perception of the real labor and social conditions of the *obreras* and that of economically privileged “First World” consumers come to the fore. While their testimonial accounts reflect the actual material conditions of labor in the *maquilas*, they are nonetheless carefully constructed *performances* that offer counter-hegemonic narratives that resist and challenge reified conceptions of labor and social relations under contemporary neoliberalism in Mexico’s northern border cities.

In a later scene, the filmmakers capture an aerial view of ten maquila *obreras* in straight line mimicking the tasks of assembly-line production in unison. In the context of a machine-like soundtrack emulating the rhythmic drone of what can be described as a

kind of sonic hybrid of early twentieth-century Fordist production and contemporary hi-tech automated production, the camera pans to a ground-view shot of the workers. As the camera makes its way across the assembly line towards a frontal view of the *obreras*, it suddenly takes up-close shots of arms and hand performing the repeating motion of the labor process. The performance draws to a disquieting conclusion as the *obreras* complete their task/act with hands drawn near their side with hands in fist, bodies upright, rigid—mechanical. The scene finally comes to a close as the title of film, “MAQUILAPOLIS: city of factories,” vertically divides the screen—the obreras situated under the film title at the bottom of a valley while a maquiladora plant sits upon the plateau of hill high above.

I want to draw attention to this filmic representation of the labor process and the topography of production alluded to above. That the performance is specifically situated outside the shop floor deserves attention. Two significant points come to the fore. Firstly, performativity in this specific context emerges as a socially symbolic act of both exposition and resistance. The performance draws to our attention what Marx refers to as “human labor power expended without regard of the form of its expenditure.” The characterization of the workers as mechanical bodies or appendages to fixed capital enacts a sensuousless and rigid construction of human labor. In enacting the very process of abstract, reified labor, in the “open,” as it were, the scene, with great emotional and intellectual force, brings to our attention human labor power expended *with* regard to the form of its expenditure, one that belies utopian narratives of neoliberal modernization. In other words, in enacting the very reifying processes of alienation and loss of subjectivity experienced on the shop floor, the film does not fall prey to the kinds of representational

limits often associated with images and narratives of disempowerment and victimization. In performing and enacting their own reified status, as it were, the *obreras* effectively articulate the processes and means by which abstract, alienating labor emerges. Arguably such an act potentially rehearses and re-inscribes reified labor and, therefore, colludes with the very structure of domination that it seeks to challenge. Yet, in the context of a staged enactment located specifically along a dusty stretch of land directly in front of the maquila plant, their performance represents, however problematic, a carefully constructed and highly strategic form of opposition, resistance, and collective agency. Moreover, that the setting of this performance occurs outside the *maquila* plant not only constitutes a carefully constructed exposé in drawing out labor from the confines of the work-floor, but it gestures toward the relationship between the erasure of actually existing labor and reified social relations. As a political act of resistance, it brings into relief the degree to which abstract labor extends to the social realm. In bridging the economic/labor to the social/political, their performance gestures to how their mechanized and de-sensualized corporeal identities are assumed to extend into greater social spaces, whether private or public. From the perspective of capital and patriarchy (patriarchal capitalism, if you will), reification in this respect constitutes a form of being and subjectivity attached to the realm of production and consumption, to the reduction of subjectivity in terms of things or thing-hood within and outside the confines of the work-floor. It is in the very act of labor assumed by capital that the film challenges, demystifies, and problematizes the perspective of patriarchal capitalism along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Secondly, the positioning of the maquila plant high above on a hilltop likewise constitutes an important symbolic act in refocusing our attention to the form of

appearance of production. The image of the *obreras* in rigid pose holding their fisted hands close to their side gestures toward what we might refer to as an absent narrative of the story of development from the perspective of capital and the neoliberal political economy along the U.S.-Mexico border. While maquiladora production and neoliberal capitalism, in general, represent the inevitable drive toward modernization and comparative advantage from the standpoint of capital, the film undoubtedly draws our attention to fundamental contradictions of modernization, particularly to issues of social, economic, and political inequality and violence. As Lisa Lowe reminds us, “modernity has not been the progressive development of human freedom but has been constituted by fundamental contradictions—between metropolitan colonial capital and colonized labor, between universality and particularity, between individual autonomy and collective rationality” (2001: 11). I now want to pick up on this notion of the development of freedom and situate it in relation to the question of abstract labor and Marx’s concept of the sensuous.

In revisiting Marx’s theory of the sensuous, Massimo De Angelis’ analysis of contemporary commodity fetishism offers a useful framework in thinking about the relationship between abstract labor and social reification. The question of praxis and emancipation under current conditions of neoliberal capitalism at the U.S.-Mexico border takes representational form in the documentary *Maquilapolis* through oppositional filmic narratives against processes of abstraction, reification, and the production of that violent paradox called human “things.”

De Angelis’ interpretation of Marx’s commodity fetishism highlights one of the key features of *Capital*—the “form of appearance” of social relations under capitalism.

While the analysis of the “form of appearance” of social relations constitutes a key general feature of Marx’s work, De Angelis offers a perspective that emphasizes important distinctions and connections between kinds of labor and the form which this labor appears to take. Drawing from Marx’s theory of the “sensuous,”³⁵ De Angelis revisits the concept of the “abstract” in relation to commodity fetishism and social reification and suggests that “[Marx’s] notion of the sensuous is crucial in differentiating Marx from mechanistic and economistic approaches...in that it poses the question of *praxis* and human emancipation ” (FN 4, 7). De Angelis reminds us that the concept of the sensuous in Marx is a “confirmation of ‘human reality’ grounded on the “totality” of social relations and sensuous existence. These human senses, according to Marx, “come into being only through the existence of their *objects*, through *humanized* nature” (8). Yet, as De Angelis points out, material need or Necessity can have a determining influence on human sensuous and how people come to experience the totality of their personal and collective existence. The notion of *constraint* plays a crucial role in understanding the concept of “restricted sense” or “restricted sensuousness.” Rather than conceptualizing the abstract outside the “real” or simply in terms of false consciousness, the category of the abstract must be understood as still constituting a sensuous activity, one, however, generated and grounded on some form of socio-economic constraint. Restricted sense under conditions of socio-economic constraint is nevertheless “a sensuous experience, a lived experience” and, therefore, a concrete experience. From this perspective, the abstract indicates a sensuous activity but one characterized as “a lived

³⁵ In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx describes the plurality of human sensuous, among other things, as “seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, sensing, wanting, acting, [and] loving” (quoted in De Angelis, 7).

experience in which human sensibility is confined and restricted to one dominant character” (9). De Angelis, however, suggests that this means more than simply abstracting from the concrete determinations of actual, useful labor. It also necessarily means a form of abstraction that affects the realm of workers’ sensuousness. “It means,” writes De Angelis, “to abstract from the *lived experience* of the workers,” (9) which necessarily entails looking at labor from the position of restricted sensuousness.

If restricted sense or restricted sensuousness emerges from a form of constraint, then we must look at the social conditions of constraint, that is to say, in terms of how general social reification emerges from conditions of economic constraint. In addition to limited access to or prevention from the means of production, cultural patterns of consumption and worker insecurity (including draconian cuts in social security networks and the strategic production of the all too pervasive reserve army of labor) illustrate other related forms of social constraint and socially induced abstract labor (10). The reduction of the worker to the position of restricted sensuousness, therefore, points to such restrictedness as a social relation. This, however, entails an examination of restricted sensuousness from the perspective of both labor and capital.

How, then, is this abstraction from lived experience socially expressed? From the perspective of capital, labor is sensuous-less, external objectivity to be either controlled and/or appropriated. Expressed in term of de-personalizing processes or de-humanizing activity, abstract labor reproduces the material and ideological conditions seemingly independent of the worker. From the perspective of the workers, their real activity, however constrained, is never entirely sensuousless (11). On the contrary, it is experiential contradiction or fundamental contradiction “between an activity which

carries the burden of a restricted sensuousness and the real of sensuous needs, sensuous desires, and sensuous aspirations” (11). Restricted sensuousness constitutes an element of the fundamental contradictions of the development of human freedom under uneven conditions of globalization. Yet, in this “relation of struggle,” how is the question of commodity fetishism relevant to our analysis of the film? It is relevant to the extent that it offers a critical lens for linking capitalist social relations to the ways in which these relations are cognitively apprehended. Because we are dealing with a social relation, the question of commodity fetishism is crucial toward understanding how this relation appears and has social meaning. How it appears, De Angelis reminds us, is contingent upon those holding different socio-economic positions or experiencing and comprehending both their conditions of labor and relations of production. In contrast to the de-sensualized activity performed by reified, sensuousless “things” (from the perspective of capital), for the worker the “activity presents itself as a lived process of reification . . . in which the totality of human senses . . . [clash] with [the] process of their restriction” (13). While for capital the labor relation appears as external object and as commodity form, for the laborer “the commodity form . . . is not posited outside their lived experience” (13). It is precisely this point I want to emphasize when viewing the performance of assembly-line production in the scene alluded to above. In this performance, these seemingly objective, cyborg-like characters of capitalist production enact what De Angelis identifies as “the process of restricted sensuousness [that] exists in clashing opposition with the humanity of the subjects as sensuous beings” (13). But to what extent, if at all, does this visual performance transcend the conditions of reification? While certainly the *obreras*’ performance is not a “real-life process of

reification,” it nonetheless constitutes a critical representational move that refocuses our attention to both maquila labor relations and greater social relations in the context of neoliberal capitalism along the borderlands. Resurrecting human sensuousness from the tomb of abstraction, however, does not simply constitute representations of emancipated labor or labor operating along the margins of capital. While it is difficult to argue that *Maquilapolis* offers a representational account of “another totality with its own system [and] laws,” it certainly offers an alternative “spatial imaginary” and performs “a fiction of community” that effectively “comments upon the capitalist social relations that exist, defamiliarizing those social relations as artificial, as relations that could be transformed through political action” (Lowe, 11-12). The process of defamiliarization, thus, becomes a vital (political) operation in this film, one that appropriates the very symbols and objects of reified, alienated labor in order to underscore the uneven relations of power existing and operating not only in terms of class antagonisms, but also of gendered violence.

A sequence of two consecutive scenes offers a radical assessment of the normative social relations in this context by drawing our attention to the seemingly mundane and utilitarian garb worn by the *maquila* workers as they enter a factory. Approximately one quarter into the film, we encounter a scene in which Carmen, Lourdes and their fellow *promotoras* participate in border tours for U.S. and North American activists. Traveling alongside an industrial park in Otay Mesa, Carmen lectures to a van full of activists about the color-coded scheme of the smocks worn by maquila workers. As a wave of workers enters the factory, Carmen informs her audience that “the color of your smock tells your rank in the factory.” “They see your color,” she continues, “and they know who you are:

group leader, supervisor, or just an operator” (14:25-14:55). Directors Funari and De La Torre have carefully established the significance of the color scheme by attaching one’s position or status within the factory to that of a company uniform. In what appears to be a similar move in Chapter 4 of *Desert Blood* where the narration depicts (participates in?) the process of abstract labor and reification, Ivon describes in detail the movement of workers outside a maquila plant. “Buses moved in and out of the gated lot, their yellow headlights beaming on the golf-course-like lawn that wrapped around the factory. The workers arriving for the midnight shift streamed out of the buses and filed into the fluorescent lights of the lobby. All women, they looked like clones. Same lipstick. Same blue smocks. Same long dark hair” (21). While the “colored smock” scene from *Señorita Extraviada* attempts to acknowledge the various subjects behind the smocks articulated through the naming and the location of the *obrero*, the passage above insists on representing the obreras as identical, homogenous, and subject-less. This overly homogenous and monolithic representation echoes what initially appears to be a similar move in the film as the color-coded uniforms signal organizational efficiency within the plant that takes on a kind of “mystical character . . . abounding in metaphysical subtleties” as Marx puts it in his analysis of commodity fetishism (163-164). In *Señorita Extraviada*, however, the color-coded smock performs, if you will, a transformative function in reconfiguring the (sensuous) worker to a restrictive and reductive form of being. To the extent to which this reduction plays outside the factory is debatable, though, as argued above, in the context of social reification, social relations often take the form of relations between things or abstract (citizen) subjects. My point, however, is the way in which the filmmakers, both the directors and *obreras*, have established the

importance of the color-coded smocks that sets up the following scene, one that, I suggest, constitutes one of the most artistically rendered forms of radical critique and opposition to the forces of abstraction and erasure in this film.

In the following scene, the filmmakers have carefully placed individual smocks of different colors with various angles of a maquila, a residential building, and a busy overpass in the background. For example, a blue smock is carefully placed on a wire hanger perched high above (on an overpass?) with what looks to be the roof of a maquila in the background. As the blue smock sways to the movement of a mild breeze, the calm voice of a woman enters the scene: "I am from the state of Michoacán. There are no jobs there like we have here." The scene follows with an image of a light-blue smock placed on a black plastic hanger with the docking area of a maquila in the background. This time the voice of another woman accompanies the image: "I am from Guadalajara, Jalisco." The next scene features a yellow smock, but this time with what looks to be demolition rubble alongside a large, bulky residential building in the background. A woman's voice enters: "I am from Sola de Vega, Oaxaca." The next scene features a blue smock placed on a metal hanger placed in front of a maquila perched on a hill high above. Another woman declares: "I am from Mazatlán," followed by a scene featuring a black smock hanging from an overpass with a busy highway or avenue below. Again, the voice of another woman enters the scene: "I was born in Sinaloa."

On its face, the formal elements of these five-second vignettes appear quite simple and would suggest offering very little by way of radical critique of the processes of abstraction, social reification, and loss of subjectivity. In fact, the color of the smocks are never revealed or a point of discussion. Some may argue that this sequence of images

and sound unwittingly reproduces and, therefore, reinforces the very structure of domination that the film intends to overcome. On the contrary, this sequence of images and sound carefully deconstructs the processes of abstraction and reification by appropriating the very objects and symbols of abstraction and reification toward its own undoing. As such, I argue that this sequence clearly represents a radical oppositional critique that points toward social reification, but one that unsettles hegemonic narratives of political-economic development and the “progressive development of human freedom” under neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, I would suggest that the power of this scene derives from the skillful combination of voice and image that de-emphasizes the mysterious power of the color-coded smock (while interestingly placing the smock in visual relief) as an index of identity and, in effect, dissolving the mysterious power that the smock holds over the worker.

In “Narrative Acts: Fronteriza Stories of Labor and Subjectivity” from *Migrant Imaginaries*, Alicia Schmidt Camacho begins her critique of “third-world” women as the ideal labor force for transnational capitalism by offering an insightful epigraph narrating the “life of labor” for a maquila *obrero* during the mid-1990s. The epigraph, like the colored smocks captured on film by the *obrero* videographers, references not only the materiality of the worker, but also gestures toward the historical contingencies underwriting the conditions of migration and labor. Yet, while the documentary begins in earnest to unfold the social and historical totality from which migration and labor emerge, the epigraph further extends this project through testimonial narrative. Like the documentary, the epigraph begins by stating the obrero’s place of origin. “My name is María Guadalupe Torres Martínez. I am from the city of Matamoros, Mexico” (237).

What is particularly interesting here is the importance of naming, that is to say, while the documentary states place of origin, it refuses to reveal the name behind the smock and the voice—the subject of labor and the subjectivity of the worker. Schmidt Camacho, on the other hand, offers what I take to be the furthering or unfolding of subjectivity. In her *testimonio*, Torres develops a narrative that speaks of the multiple political, economic, social, and cultural forces overdetermining the conditions of life and labor along the U.S.-Mexico border.

My name is María Guadalupe Torres Martínez. I am from the city of Matamoros, Mexico, which is on the border between Mexico and the United States. . . . I started working the maquiladora twenty-eight years ago. I came from the town of San Luis Potosí, which is in the interior of Mexico. My mother came from the country and I have always been a country woman at heart. However, we had to leave San Luis Potosí to earn a living—my mother was a widow and there was no decent paying work for us where we lived. . . . In the United States, we worked as domestic employees in wealthy homes, but I never liked it. When we found out the first maquiladora factories were arriving in the border city of Matamoros, I said to my mother, “Let’s return to Mexico!” I thought that since they were American factories, they would pay well, and that the work would be cleaner. I thought I was going to like it. (Quoted in *Migrant Imaginaries*, 237)

Torres’s narrative is significant in several related ways. Her *testimonio* addresses the issue of migration in terms of socio-economic necessity in relation to the history of capitalist expansionism and neocolonial modernization in Mexico since at least the 1965 Border Industrial Program. As a “country woman” displaced from Mexico’s interior, issues of dispossession, including possible enclosure, exodus, and resettlement(s) come to the fore. Secondly, she tells us that her mother is widowed. While she never discloses the reasons or context for her mother’s marital status, it does raise possible questions concerning previous migrations. Perhaps it is the case that María’s father migrated

elsewhere north, either in the northern states of Mexico or across the border into the United States. And like María and her mother, migration comes out of the context of necessity. Or, were mother and daughter left behind for other reasons linked to patriarchy and labor that posit women as befitting lower pay and poor working conditions? And while we can only conjecture as to the reasons for their migration northward, María's narrative represents her mother as exercising agency and power. María's narrative also draws attention to what is undoubtedly a story of individual empowerment and political agency, one characterized as a commitment to protecting her family under the most challenging conditions, but one that avoids the pitfalls of patriarchal notions of motherhood and the family. Thirdly, contrary to nativist discourses that frame so-called "illegals" as social and cultural threats to the U.S. nation-state, María displaces this notion and turns it on its head as she reconfigures fear and threat as qualities associated with working for wealthy households in the U.S. It is worth noting that circulatory migration that characterized migration flows between Mexico and the United States had drastically altered with the 1992 relaxation of the *Posse Comitatus* and increased militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border exemplified in the necropolitical border enforcement strategies of the post-NAFTA era. Lastly, María's critique of the American factories (*maquilas*) dispels the cultural myth of capitalist progress associated with industrial modernization. The fact that María experienced neither a decent wage nor better working conditions disrupts the discourse of what Schmidt Camacho identifies as the "'regulative psychobiography' that industrialization imposes on women and migrants . . . [as the] factory wages and the relative autonomy they bring did not mean progress over the life she left in her hometown" (239). It is specifically the working conditions

and wages experienced by María that draw connection to our analysis of the film's portrayal of assembly-line production. She informs us that while preparing epoxy at a *maquila* operated by Kermet de México, workers would refer to her not by her given name, but by the name María Epoxy. As Schmidt Camacho correctly points out, not only does the maquiladora remake her subjectivity, it also "alters her sense of bodily integrity" as she faces almost daily the toxic working conditions of the plant (239).

Yet, despite some potential shortcomings of the documentary, in a seemingly paradoxical fashion, the visual centeredness of the smocks in combination with the visual erasure of the voices of each of the women speaking destabilizes the centrality of the image of the smocks while relocating the women at the center and, therefore, at the core of this narrative. By appropriating the very symbols of abstract, reified labor and the power that it holds in constructing and shaping identity and subjectivity within the factory (and, by extension, into society at large), the scenes function in the manner of a recovery project that locates women as real social, political, and economic agents in history possessing the very qualities of sensuousness that began this discussion.

Throughout the film, Carmen, Lourdes, and her *comadres* in solidarity (*promotoras*) represent the power and sovereignty of women's struggles against structures of oppression, domination, and violence under a society dominated by patriarchy, economic exploitation, and state violence. Especially in the case of Carmen, we see her not only in the capacity of a hard working, loving mother and gracious, loyal friend, but also in the capacity of a teacher, mentor, and social activist. In one scene, Carmen is filmed giving a lecture on labor rights to her fellow *obreras*. In another scene, she and Lourdes are caught on film discussing legal strategies with a lawyer on reclaiming severance pay

from a maquila that unexpectedly relocated to Southeastern Asia without paying their employees their due share. These women, the *promotoras* fighting for socio-economic justice, constitute a growing number of “non-state actors operating as a transnational advocacy network” that, as Lisa Lowe correctly points out, “target the *governmentality*—the larger set of social disciplines that includes state institutions, corporate industry, media discourse, border policing, and social norms themselves—that results in the treatment of the border as a zone of disposable rights” (2008: 18).

***Señorita Extraviada* and *Desert Blood*: Social Reification and Disposability**

In this section, we begin our analysis of representations of social reification and commodity fetishism by looking at Lourdes Portillo’s provocative documentary film, *Señorita Extraviada*. Recurring visual images of women’s dress shoes disrupt what might otherwise be described as a powerfully emotional filmic narrative documenting family testimonials of the murdered and the disappeared, interviews of political authorities and social activists, and media representations of the murders. In addition to this narrative strategy, the recurring trope of women’s dress shoes constitutes an important filmic narrative interruption or break that draws critical attention to the complex relationship among social reification, commodity fetishism, and cultural myths of female disposability.

Señorita Extraviada begins with the image of a young woman’s facial profile superimposed over a sequence of several images capturing the movement of a busy commercial district in downtown Ciudad Juárez. As the image of the woman begins to fade, the busy commercial district comes into sharper focus, eventually dominating the screen. The scene is accompanied by a minimalist, melancholic piano score that

accentuates the spectral quality of the young woman slowly fading from view. In developing a captivating narrative that examines the relationship between capital and gender, the opening scene draws attention to the broad cultural and political economy of terror against women, a system of terror operating beyond the closed confines of the maquila shop floor and into a wider and more comprehensive network of violence exercised in both private and public spaces. Moreover, the opening scene gestures toward what will become a recurring theme throughout the film—pervasive social reification underwriting the conditions of possibility for femicide and anti-female terror, or to put it somewhat differently, the deadly relationship between neoliberal rationalities and misogyny, a relationship that signifies a ramped up³⁶ and extremely violent form of patriarchy grounded on already existing forms of gender inequality.

Following the opening scene described above, we are literally taken to “ground level” as the camera captures the movement of both vehicles and pedestrians. Immediately, three young people, presumably *juarenses*, consisting of two adult females and a male, come into focus. As the camera captures the three young adults walking alongside a boutique shop toward an unstated destination, we are struck by the haunting image of a black cross framed within a pink square painted on a street post. And as the black cross comes into greater focus, the three people become enveloped by a shadow through which they eventually exit the screen. Through a carefully arranged ensemble of auditory and visual elements, including a subtle yet suggestive musical score, the effective use of superimposition, the play between both background and relief and shadow and light, and

³⁶ I purposively use the term “ramped up” in order to draw an important connection, however figural, between venture capital and anticipated increases in product demand *and* exacerbated forms of violence against women.

nuanced facial gesture and body posture, the filmmakers deliver an ominous impression of a tragic account of gendered violence that is soon to unfold. At this moment in the narrative, however, we are left with only the black cross returning our gaze. It is worth noting that at the beginning of this filmic sequence, two of the three people walking along the sidewalk stare directly into the camera. Their gaze might best be described as serious or solemn, especially the young woman closest to the camera. The woman's gaze effectively creates a sense of self-awareness or self-consciousness on the part of the viewer as, in this very moment, the distanced and secluded voyeuristic location once held securely by the viewer suddenly collapses. We are implicated and reconfigured as the subject of analysis, or, even perhaps, transformed as a representational object, that, like those caught on film, are part of this (expository) filmic narrative. Yet, as the black cross comes into sharper relief, the young woman withdraws her defiant gaze as she quickly refocuses her attention to the sidewalk below. As all three casually continue their pace, the scene fades into darkness. What is particularly interesting about this sequence is the way in which the filmmakers return the gaze back to the audience, through the young woman's penetrating stare and the cross's incessant public cry for justice. The film leaves little room for viewers to comfortably situate themselves, for it invokes some sense of self-reflexivity on the part of viewers. Unlike *nota roja* periodicals or the kinds of photographic journalism exemplified in Charles Bowden's *Juárez: The Laboratory of our Future* (1998), *Señorita Extraviada* draws attention to the viewer's positionality and, in doing so, highlights the filmic representational strategies deployed by the filmmakers and the socially conditioned viewership informing the viewers perception of the film.³⁷

³⁷ In her critique of Charles Bowden's illustrative representation of Juárez, Karen Soto suggests that the

Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's study of the social functions of photography, Karen Soto reminds us that rather than simply understanding vision and visibility as unmediated processes for accessing objective truth, vision must be understood as a socio-historical formation. As Soto reminds us, "The objective appearance of the photograph [or documentary film] is enabled precisely through the social rules and definitions that enable objectivity. Like the photograph, 'objective truth' is itself a representation of socially conditioned vision" (425).

Questions concerning who gets captured on film and who has the power and authority to film others, a process that registers the transfiguration of anonymous public spectators into subjects of social analysis, emerge at the outset of this film. That the film raises this issue from the outset is significant in several ways. Firstly, it raises the question of who is able or not able to exercise the power of recording or documenting subjects of analysis, particularly in the specific socio-historical context of femicide. Addressing this question, of course, requires that we pay particular attention to the relationship between political agency and social position or class status. This, then, raises another question, that is, by what standard does one come to identify proper subjects of the film? Why does the film feature these particular voices vis-à-vis state-sponsored discourses? As this chapter hopes to make clear, it is precisely in the way in which this documentary offers counter-narratives that challenge dominant narratives of blame and neoliberal modernization that his film deserves critical attention. By critically engaging with such dominant moral discourse like "blame the victim," "*la doble vida*," and "mismanaged

stunning and graphic photographs of extreme physical violence tend to precondition the viewers conception of the living. On this issue she writes, "The photographs of people who are (still) alive are in many ways more haunting than those of corpses; image of living people are images of people who are not yet dead" (424).

life,” *Señorita Extraviada* disrupts the power that these hegemonic articulations of proper gendered conduct reproduce over time. The filmic and literary narratives examined here confront, complicate, and deconstruct naturalized discourses and commonsensical attitudes of gender differentiation. In doing so, the film problematize the kinds of ideological closure that such discourses seek to establish. When constructing critical narratives on the subject of femicide and anti-female terror, the filmmakers of both these documentaries have carefully chosen and strategically deployed particular subjects and voices in order to give life to their stories, both figuratively and literally. The idea of counteracting the deadening effects of overpowering images that tend to erase female subjectivity grounded on sensationalized narratives of disempowerment and victimization raises yet another issue, namely the ways in which visual and textual representations of female death collaborate with what Alicia Schmidt Camacho aptly identifies as the “conversion of the dead body into an aesthetic object [that] repeats the violence of the murder itself” (59). How, then, does the photographic and filmic recording of appropriate subjects, however unwittingly, collude and collaborate with sensationalized, hypostasized conceptions of female disempowerment and disposability? In what ways might cultural representations of violence against women mediate our understanding of female subjectivity? As I discuss in greater detail below, when analyzing visual and literary representations of femicide, we must draw particular attention to issues of silencing and erasure of subjectivity that such representations either potentially or actually reproduce. If indeed the opening scene from *Señorita Extraviada* effectively opens a critical space that historically situates femicide, one that takes into account multitude and overlapping structuring forces that constitute the conditions of possibility

that enable violence against women, then certainly it is one that draws a critical connection between reification and femicide through recurring images of women's shoes.

Returning to the film, as the three young adults fade from view, a brief moment of darkness dominates the screen. Darkness, however, is immediately interrupted as the scene shifts to a well-lit window display of women's dress shoes. The displayed items are medium heeled, strapped leather women's dress shoes, one black and the other white. Then, suddenly, the camera shifts attention to the feet of a group of girls dressed in school attire—at first, the camera focuses on the shiny, black shoes and white, high-stretched socks, then, slowly pans upward until reaching the back torso of the girls. We soon learn, however, that the three girls standing directly in front of a display case are in fact looking at the very shoes on display featured earlier in this scene. The combination of such filmic elements like the superimposed image of a young woman upon a busy commercial district, the minimalist, dirge-like, contemplative piano score, the haunting image of a black cross on public display, and now the recurring image of women's shoes on display and, as the film later makes clear, displayed in photographic images of the cadaver symbolically marks the multiple intersecting and overlapping socio-economic and cultural forces at work. As a way of explicating the complex, multi-layered visual/audio representations from the film, we turn to two important Marxist concepts—commodity fetishism and reification.

In suggesting that the recurring trope of women's shoes/feet refocuses our attention on the relationship between violence against women and social reification, I draw from the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism in order to make important connections between

the reproduction of reified social relations and the erasure of subjectivity, an erasure that bears directly on the production of disposability as a form of socio-political abandonment. In the film, fetishism operates on at least two related levels—sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism. The World Health Organization defines sexual fetishism as the “reliance on some non-living object [or “thing”] as a stimulus for sexual arousal and sexual gratification” (2007). As a sexual disorder, shoe fetishism implies the attribution of sexual qualities to shoes or footwear as an alternative or complement to a sexual relationship. While this chapter focuses on the concept of commodity fetishism, due to the highly sexualized construction of female identity associated with the victims, most notably exemplified in “blame the victim” discourses, and also in traditional patriarchal notions of proper female conduct, we must not overlook the extent to which sexual fetishism is inextricably linked to objectification and reification that constitute two of the more important dimensions of social and political abandonment that reproduces female disposability while simultaneously maintaining impunity.

The following scene locates two distinct but related spaces in which violence and terror against the female body (politic) persists. Immediately after interviewing a grieving but hopeful mother of one of the lost victims (“*las desaparecidas*”), the film turns to a black and white television featuring a disturbing image of what looks to be the remains of decomposed body parts in tattered clothing. As a close-up of the cadaver dominates the screen, the narrator’s voice enters: “In Juarez, predators have no trouble finding their prey. The only facts about the victims [that have emerged] are that they were poor, dark, and...had shoulder length hair” (14:20). While describing the victims as poor, dark, and having shoulder length hair, the camera focuses on two adolescent girls in

a shoe store, presumably in or around downtown Ciudad Juárez. As with the beginning scenes of the film that feature three young schoolgirls looking at a shoe store display, the camera sequence here begins by focusing on the bare feet of the two dark-skinned, adolescent girls. The camera pans upward until we see their faces. The expression of the girl on the left side of the screen captures our attention. For just a brief moment, her expression constitutes what Roland Barthes identifies as the “punctum”³⁸ of the visual image as she turns her attention across her left shoulder gazing into the distance—a transformation of expression characterized as one of contentment or happiness to that of immanent fear and danger.³⁹ The transformation of the girl’s facial expression is that which disrupts the viewer’s gaze or, according to Barthes, that which “pierces the viewer.” While brief, this shot constitutes one of the more critical junctures of the entire film.

Immediately after experiencing this facial transformation, the camera then turns to a hazy, out-of-focus image of a dark haired, mustached man standing presumably located at

³⁸ Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981). In discussing the duality that marks certain photographic images, Barthes sets out to distinguish a “co-presence of two discontinuous [visual] images,” namely the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* refers to the range of possible meanings available to any given observer of the photograph. According to Kasia Houlihan, the *studium* suggests that the “image is a unified and self-contained whole whose meaning can be taken in at a glance (without effort, or ‘thinking’). . . . The *punctum* (a Latin word derived from the Greek word for trauma) on the other hand inspires an intensely private meaning, one that is suddenly, unexpectedly recognized and consequently remembered (it “shoots out of [the photograph] like an arrow and pierces me”). . . . The *punctum* is ‘historical’ as an experience of the irrefutable indexicality of the photograph . . . that attracts and holds the viewer’s (the Spectator’s) gaze; it pricks or wounds the observer” (“Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida—Reflections on Photography*,” 2004). It is precisely the young girl’s facial expression that disrupts the filmic narrative, or, to borrow from Barthes, it is the sudden transformation in expression that shoots out and pierces the viewer’s reading of the film.

³⁹ The identities of the two girls are never revealed. Nor is it clear if they are aware of their being caught on film while in the shoe store. This raises some interesting questions about the voyeuristic nature of this scene, including questions about the extent to which the narrative bears any relation to their lived experiences or social reality. I often wonder if they have unwittingly been recruited as actors in this narrative of femicide and terror. While Portillo is undoubtedly attempting to situate the femicide and disappearances in larger social context, to what extent does this scene or “performance” reproduce an essentialist narrative of fear and threat?

another part of the store. Behind the man rests a wall display of athletic shoes in sharper focus. While it is difficult to identify this man as either an employee or a customer, the out-of-focus imaging coupled with the spatial positioning of the man is suggestive of the environment of fear and threat surrounding violence against young, racialized women.

The refusal to reveal both the location and the identity of the male gaze suggests the larger concealed identity of perpetrators of the crimes. I want to suggest that this out-of-focus imaging of the man is relevant in at least two related ways. Firstly, rather than simply focusing attention on particular individuals, often categorized as sexual perverts, body snatchers, or serial killers, the refusal to offer a well-focused image of the male (gaze) speaks indirectly of the larger social totality through which femicide emerges. Secondly and closely related to the first point, in refusing to focus primarily on the “who” of the crimes, that is on the responsible individuals, the filmmakers have refocused our attention to the “what” of the crimes, if you will. While *Señorita Extraviada* undoubtedly seeks to identify the perpetrators of the crimes, the film goes over and beyond this oversimplified and de-contextualized explanatory approach. The film, I argue, seeks to address the complex multiple forces underwriting femicide or, to put it differently, it seeks to get at the “what” that constitutes the conditions of possibility that enable violence against women. Drawing from Marcial González’s analysis of reification and the Chicano novel, *Señorita Extraviada* represents a form of resistance to reification by addressing the ways in which reification is “historically, socially, and materially based,” particularly in the way in which it entails “a form of consciousness or a cultural logic that alienates many aspects of human life from the network of social relations that makes them possible” (11). Drawing from González, we might add,

Similarly, developmental systems theorist Susan Oyama has the logic of consciousness in mind . . . in stating that ‘if we want to fight the good fight, we must know what the enemy is, or we will waste precious time and energy. Note that I say *what* the enemy is, not *who*; I am concerned with ways of thinking, not people.’ We could interpret Oyama’s statement as a call to arms not against armies or other state apparatuses, but against reified consciousness. From these various perspectives, reification can be understood, in one sense, as a way of thinking about (or a form of consciousness that perceives) social relations as natural rather than conditioned by class contradictions. (11)

While generally I agree with Oyama’s argument, the separation between the “who” and the “what” is never made clear. Is it possible to separate the form of thinking from the thinker? Moreover, I find the dismissal of challenging “armies and other state apparatuses” inappropriate in the specific context of femicide and anti-female in the borderlands. Such logic ironically reproduces a reified conception of the separation of ideological positions or rationalities from the very institutions of which they are a part. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the passage touches upon a broad conceptualization of reification that may help us look at the ways in which the film operates at various levels of signification, particularly in terms of the “levels of signification implicit in the rift between the immediately given and the socially mediated” (11). It is worth restating that what González is driving at is the ways in which cultural representations, both in terms of form and content (e.g., narrative and narration), capture “social totality” or fail to think “totality.” Drawing from Timothy Bewes, reification, in this particular instance constitutes “the failure to think totality” (Quoted in González, 11). The inability to think totality suggests the ways in which “the failure to understand how objects, events, and situations are intricately connected to and constituted by dynamic social processes that have evolved historically at different levels: locally, nationally, and globally” (11). Thus,

de-reification suggests the ways in which textual form opens a space for grasping how people, objects, places, and social activity are intimately and intricately connected to and constituted by dynamic socio-historical processes and cultural contexts.

Through a complex combination of filmic elements, this carefully constructed scene creates a timbre of fear and threat that culminates in a disturbing image of a cadaver buried in sand with feet exposed wearing shoes similar to those displayed at the beginning of the film. The film strategically focuses upon a magazine cover featuring, among other “newsworthy events,” the Juárez femicide, which includes the image of a cadaver accompanied by the following caption: “Ciudad Juárez: los asesinatos.” The narrative reaches a terminal point—the tragic conclusion of a murdered body buried (disguised) in the desert sand as the very commodity that had captured the gaze of its viewers earlier in the film again stands in sharp relief. This disturbing and unsettling sequence of images and sound brings into focus the complex and often paradoxical relationship between documenting and disseminating graphic images of gendered violence and reproducing the very kinds of images and discourses that “displace any recognition of poor women’s subjectivity in life” (Schmidt Camacho 37).

It is precisely this concept of the displacement of subjectivity that we now turn our attention. In her provocative essay, “Mujer constante más allá de la muerte,” Adriana Martínez offers a critical analysis of the overpowering cultural constructions of femicide in Ciudad Juárez. She argues that cultural producers on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border often face dilemmas when representing images of bodily violence and mutilation related to femicide. She also suggests that representations that construct images or narratives of “women-as-victims” often become discursively entrapped as

disempowered and voiceless (91). In focusing on the paradoxical manner in which these images and narratives tend to reproduce cultural notions of helplessness and victimization, Martínez proposes the dual concepts of or dialectical tensions represented in “visibility/invisibility” and “voice/silence” as theoretical parameters in her analysis of representations of femicide. In taking this approach, Martínez emphasizes the ways in which, particularly in the post-NAFTA era, “the figure of the *juarense* woman has been repeatedly made invisible on account of her inferior status with a patriarchal society” (93). On the other hand, the *juarense* woman has regrettably becomes visible only to the extent that she is either sexualized or killed. How, then, can cultural representations transcend this seeming paradox and the pitfalls that appear to stall any genuine or honest effort to document, record, or reconceptualize femicide in its most brutal form or image? To address this question, we now turn to the beginning chapter of the *Desert Blood*.

The first chapter of the novel captures in graphic detail the brutal murder of woman. In terms of form and strategies of representation, it is significant that Gaspar de Alba begins the novel through this disturbing depiction. In contrast to the second chapter of the novel, which introduces the reader to Ivon Villa leaning back on a “leather headrest” reading a magazine on a plane to El Paso, Texas, the first chapter begins with a rope tied tightly around the neck of a woman whose name, age, class, race, and nationality are never revealed. In this scene of unimagined brutality, we learn that the woman is dragged along sand and rocks and that the perpetrators are men, at least till the end of the chapter. This is an important detail that I discuss in greater detail below. For now,

however, note how the narrative constructs in graphic detail the brutality and disregard for human life that has come to characterize femicide in Ciudad Juárez.

She was numb below the waist, and her face ached from the beating. One of them had given her an injection, but she could still move her arms and wedge the tips of her fingers under the noose. They'd stuffed her bra into her mouth, and the hooks in it hurt her tongue. When the car stopped, her head slammed into something hard. The pain stunned her, and she was crying again, but suddenly, she felt nothing in her arms. The numbness spread quickly up her spine. Her jaw, her belly—everything felt dead. (1)

In this graphic and emotionally unsettling narrative, Gaspar de Alba effectively invokes an environment of brutal violence through which the reader is introduced to this unimaginable form of misogyny. The narrative constructs what I take to be a form of ambient emotional shock and spatial terror in which the severity of the crimes committed against women challenges any attempt to over-intellectualize the crimes and seeks to draw upon the emotional and psychological dimensions of the reader. It is precisely with this attempt to construct an environment of shock and terror that the paradox of representation rears its ugly head. To what extent does this narrative collude with reifying portrayals of victimhood, disempowerment, and loss of agency and subjectivity? I would say to the extent that we look only at this passage in isolation, that is, out of context in relation to how Gaspar de Alba concludes this scene/chapter. How Gaspar de Alba concludes the chapter I discuss in greater detail below. But for now, I want to draw attention to how the narrative reconstructs terror that invokes a kinesthetic reading. The gross and violent misplacement of clothing articles, namely the bra, shoved into the mouth of the victim suggests in sadistic fashion a form of misogynistic power predicated on the violation of individual and private space and the interiority of woman subjected to a public display of shame and cruelty. In other words, it constitutes an act of violence

represented through the displacement of the bra, one that configures the literal and the figurative violation of what we might regard as a discretionary space related to bodily privacy. In some ways, this displacement registers a trajectory of violence that moves from the private sphere to that of the publically visible as a spectacle of terror. The narrative then goes on to describe how the bra comes to violate her body as the hooks scrape and tear against her tongue. Thus, this graphic literary representation of terror configures feminicide as a form of shamming that violates the privacy of the individual while reducing her to a state of disposability.

As the car comes to a violent stop, the captive woman bashes her head against the interior of the trunk; again, another instance of unending physical and psychological torture. Suddenly, as if mercifully, a feeling of numbness overcomes her as she loses control of her hands and legs, and with that the physical pain of being injected by a syringe, beaten on the face, tongue lashed by her own bra, and bashed in the head by the violent movement of the car. This seemingly merciful moment, however, is far from a reprieve from the violence unleashed upon her by her captives—it constitutes the very moment of *dismemberment*, of the splitting of the body and the soul, of exteriority and interiority of self. It is the moment of death captured in the final three words of this passage—“everything felt dead.” And yet, it bears mentioning that Gaspar de Alba refuses to end the passage with the past-tense verb “was,” i.e., “everything *was* dead.” In deploying the verb “felt” rather than “was,” the narrative suggests the non-finality of the act, the refusal to acknowledge the utter and total destruction of the subject, at least momentarily.

Several paragraphs afterward, however, graphic scenes of brutality and unimaginable violation return in an even more disturbing manner. We learn that the drug invokes a numbing feeling of being underwater,⁴⁰ followed by “blades slicing into her belly” accompanied by images of splashing blood and a “tearing sound, . . . something torn out by the roots, deeper than the drug” (1-2). Again, the narrative returns to what Agamben refers to as the production of bare life, that form-of-life reduced to a state of thing-hood in which the *homo sacer*, the politically, socially abandoned “Other,” is not worthy of sacrifice but can be killed with impunity. The brutality continues: “She tried to scream, but someone hit her on the mouth again, and someone else stabbed into *the bag* of water and bones—that’s all it is, the nurse at the factory once told her, a bag of water and bones” (emphasis added, 2). If the previous passage gestured toward some degree of resistance to the production of bare life and utter physical destruction, then the passage above appears to complete this transformation as she is reduced to a bag of water and bones. The recurring image of “the bag” is again rehearsed in a later chapter as Father Francis describes the discovery of a cadaver while conducting a *rastreo*. “They weren’t even bodies, just bones and clothing scattered across a radius of like 300 yards in Lomas de Poleo. . . . Someone in the group found a plastic Mervyn’s bag that had a trachea and a bra inside it” (24-25). Again, the image of a bra makes its way into the murder/cadaver scene, however, this time with a trachea placed inside a department store bag (that

⁴⁰ Significantly, Irene, Ivon’s abducted sister, experiences something similar in a dream/nightmare while being held captive by a snuff ring. Chapter 28 begins as follows: “WHEN SHE SLEEPS, SHE DREAMS OF WATER. Sometimes she is in the pool at school, alone, doing her workout, wondering where her teammates are. . . . Other times the water is black and slimy, and she knows she’s swimming in the river again. Only this time, there are hands down there growing up from the bottom, reaching for her, trying to pull her down” (195). In a similar move, Chapter 1 conjures up visceral images of violating hands reaching up to pull the woman down below (deep into the desert sand). That Gaspar de Alba describes these hands as “growing up from the bottom” also gestures to ways in which this form of gendered violence emerges and cultivates in an environment or setting conducive to such species of violence.

certainly could have carried the very shoes featured in *Señorita Extraviada*). While one could argue that the narrative potentially, if not actually, comes dangerously close to reproducing overpowering images of disposability, disempowerment, and loss of subjectivity, the way in which the narration concludes in the last paragraph of the chapter reconfigures this murder/cadaver scene beyond the kinds of reification produced in mainstream media representations from both sides of the border. “They were laughing, but she could hear someone singing, a woman’s voice singing, *sana, sana, colita de rana, si no muere hoy, que se muera mañana*. Heal, little frog’s tail; if you don’t die today, you die tomorrow. It sounded like her own voice” (2).

I want to suggest that this seemingly straightforward, linear narrative is in fact a quite complex and nuanced representation of femicide, one that does not simply focus solely on the image of the violated body, but one that in representing violence implicates the totality of society from which femicide emerges. In its formal complexity, the narrative operates on a number of levels that transcend the kinds of reified portrayals of femicide that focus on images of the cadaver or rely on bodily mutilation as a form of affectation. Firstly, as alluded to above, it is significant that the name of the victim is never revealed. However, as the story unfolds, we learn that several women in the novel are targeted, abducted and, in some cases, murdered. So, then, who is the woman in this scene? Is the victim in this scene Cecilia? Irene? Neither? Both, at least figuratively? That the identity of the victim is never revealed suggests the way in which femicide extends beyond the specificities of nationality, for example. In other words, the non-identification of the woman gets us to imagine in a more comprehensive and broader manner the possible and, therefore, real identities and subjectivities of the victims. While

certainly one could assume that the victim in this scene is either *juarense* or *mexicana*, or both, as the story unfolds, we find ourselves returning several times to this scene, for it could also be the abduction of a young woman or Chicana from El Paso, Texas, for example (e.g., Irene Villa). Yet, how is it that we can simply assume that the victim is young? Fregoso reminds us that although a large number of victims fit the description of being dark-skinned, poor, and young, we should be careful not to let it obscure the fact that women from various backgrounds and histories, from both sides of the border, have also been targeted by the perpetrators and institutions of feminicide and disappearance. In taking a critical approach that acknowledges how race, gender, class, and nationality intersect and overlap in multiple ways, I find it particularly interesting that Gaspar de Alba refuses to reveal not only the name of the woman, but her place of origin, her class status, and her nationality or citizenship status.

This claim might appear somewhat curious, especially given how representations that fail to offer historical context or biographical information of the cadaver and violated bodies tend to produce overpowering images of disposability and disempowerment. However, the non-specificity of both site and national identification in conjunction with the voice of woman singing a song of “death” suspends, at least momentarily, both the spatial and gender binary expressed in popular imaginings of feminicide. In other words, at the conclusion of this chapter there exists a momentary disruption of both the female/male and Mexico/U.S. binary. By this I mean that most accounts of feminicide, and for obvious reasons, frame violence against women in terms of patriarchal misogyny whereby men are the perpetrators of the crimes. While certainly accurate, this perspective dangerously overlooks the degree to which women are implicated in systems

of terror against other women. In the novel, Gaspar de Alba offers at least two different but related sites in which women exercise dominance against other women. The Villa household constitutes one such site, which features the tension surrounding Ivon's sexuality and the mother's objection to Ivon's sexual identity and conduct. Situated in a traditional patriarchal household in which a windowed mother struggles to care for her adolescent daughter (Irene, the high school senior), Ivon emerges as a problematic figure for her mother. As a lesbian Chicana intellectual living in Los Angeles, CA with her Anglo-American partner, Brigit, a secure distance from the critical gaze and judgment that they are certainly bound to experience in El Paso, both by her family and society at large, Ivon represents to her mother and, by extension, to many in this border town a "Pancho," "Manflora," and "Marimacha" (67). The novel represents this particular form of verbal and physical abuse and terror rather brilliantly. Let us start with a scene in which Ivon expresses to her mother, who she has not seen in two years, their intention to adopt a baby from Juárez and raise together. In that scene, Ivon asks her mother to genuinely express her feelings about the adoption, which rouses Ivon's mother to comment on her daughter's sexual-orientation. Ivon's sexuality has remained a silent issue in the household for some time, but one that is certainly a point of ongoing conflict and tension between Ivon and her parents. In response to Ivon's question, her mother tells her that she should be ashamed of that "immoral lifestyle" of hers and that bringing a child into a lesbian relationship constitutes an even more egregious violation of the moral code that the mother has set for her family. "*Es una vergüenza*. That's all you do: embarrass me in front of the whole family. It's not enough that you went away to college and turned into a *marimacha* with that Women's Studies degree, or that your father took

up drinking again because of you” (66). The passage engages with multiple forms of verbal and psychological violence, including the ostensibly mutual exclusion of Ivon from her (extended) family, referring to Ivon through the denigrating Spanish term “marimacha,” implying that she is a *vendida* and traitor of her family and “culture” by associating her supposed transformation from heteronormativity to her so-called “alternative lifestyle” with Women’s Studies, and blaming her for her father’s alcoholism (and eventual death). The familial and societal forms of exclusion and blaming, coupled with the guilt of having been the source of her father’s death, constitute some of the more disturbing articulations of anti-female terror, but one that is exercised neither by a stranger nor by a man. The intimacy of violence in this scene concludes with the mother viciously slapping Irene’s face for standing up to her mom in support of Ivon. The scene ends dramatically as Ivon forcefully grabs her mother’s arm to prevent yet another blow: “Don’t hit her in front of me. I’ve told you that,” Ivon said through her gritted teeth” (66-67). So, how many times has this scene repeated itself? Ivon’s warning would appear to imply this is not the first time this has occurred. And what does the phrase “in front of me” imply? That she has been hit by her mother other times in which Ivon was not present? In other words, the reproduction of patriarchy in this particular household is one that is reiterated through emotional and physical violence conducted by the mother. The father’s presence, however, appears well established, even in his absence. The scene concludes: “Her mother yanked her arm away, eyes blazing. ‘Don’t you dare talk to me like that. Who do you think you are, the man of the house?’” (67) Patriarchy and power over women, as this scene so aptly represents, is not one predicated solely on one’s

biological status, but rather on one in which uneven gender formations are performed by the father figure, whether male or female.

In a later scene near the end of the novel, which bears directly on the murder scene from the first chapter, we learn that one of Irene's abductors is a woman, perhaps the very same woman singing the "death song" from the first chapter. And while the most graphic instances of violence against women are those in which men commit an array of physical and emotional pain upon their victims, it is those scenes in which a woman preparing abductees (cleaning their bodies, putting on make-up, fitting costumes, etc.) for the camera that the implication of women comes to the fore. In the following scene, after being held captive for several days, Irene is finally called upon to make a video for a snuff ring in which a veiled woman by the name of Ariel prepares Irene for her "final shot."⁴¹

[Irene] closed her eyes and took some deep breaths. This was it. She knew she was next.

She shuddered again, and the shaking of her body reminded her of the bath. Hunkered down in the tin washtub, Ariel poring cold water over her. . . .

"Stop shivering," Ariel had said behind her mask, "you're making me nervous."

She couldn't stop. Even her teeth were chattering.

"Stop it!" Ariel flicked her butt with the wet towel. [Irene] couldn't feel pain anymore, just the tingling sensation on her flesh. . . .

Ariel told her to lean over and rubbed a bar of laundry soap between her legs and scrubbed real hard. The raw skin down there burned from the soap.

"Guess what? You get to go swimming again," Ariel teased her. "The river water is nice and high tonight. You'll float real easy when they're finished." She laughed and rubbed the soapy rag up and down the rest of her body. (292)

⁴¹ Recall that the snuff ring operates over the Internet. In showing rape scenes of women, the camera also captures the murder of the rape victim.

It is important to note that Irene was abducted along the Rio Bravo/Grande in the late evening hours after attending a carnival in Juárez. According to eye-witness accounts, while inebriated, Irene was seeing swimming in the river (that is described in novel as a filthy body of water dividing the two countries). I want to emphasize the extent to which psychological terror is effectively enacted in this scene, that is, through an insidious and terrifying manner in which “teasing” and “playing” with the victim is committed by another woman. Up to this point in the narrative, the novel has portrayed violence against women, particularly the snuff ring, as that committed entirely by men. That the beginning chapter gestures toward this particular dimension of feminicide is significant in challenging overpowering images of violence against women that fail to see how women are also implicated, whether directly or indirectly, in feminicide and anti-female terror. And finally, it is significant that the first chapter does not specify the location of the crime. I want to suggest how the novel from the very beginning complicates normative notions of feminicide, anti-female terror, and impunity as a socio-political phenomenon associated only and exclusively with Mexico, particularly its northern border communities. As we learn at the end of the novel, the snuff ring alluded to above actually operates out of the abandoned ASARCO plant on the U.S. side of the border in El Paso. Significantly and importantly, it is a binational operation managed by U.S. enforcement agents and elites associated with the maquiladora industry. To the extent that individual consumerism, including tourism, entertainment, and recreation operating at both sides of the border becomes implicated in this novel raises interesting questions for further examination. However, in this modest attempt to understand the ways in which the novel engages with representations of feminicide, I hope to have at least drawn attention to how

Gaspar de Alba challenges this notion by implicating U.S. governmental agencies and civil society in various ways that reconfigure femicide as a binational phenomenon in contrast to essentialist images and narratives of fear and threat of Mexico's northern border towns and citizens.⁴²

In closing our discussion of reified portrayals of disempowerment, victimization, and loss of subjectivity (in life, or, its corollary, subjectivity only through death), let us examine one important scene from the novel that speaks directly to the paradox of representation. After having learned of Cecilia's brutal murder, Ivon, Ximena, and Father Francis arrive at a medical facility in Juárez in which a team of physicians are conducting an autopsy of Cecilia's decomposed body. In order to grasp the extent to which the image of the cadaver is treated by the novel, I quote at length the following scene:

The doctor lowered her eyes. "*Lo siento,*" she said, and went back to work.

Behind them, bottles of chemicals and broken skulls lined the rusty metal shelves. Bones were heaped inside plastic trash bags on the floor.

"The medical examiner's name is Norma Flores," explained Rubí in a whisper. "We went to high school together a thousand years ago. Salvador Peñasco and Laura Godoy are interns from the School of Medicine. . . . *Ay, que tonta!* I should've brought Walter in here to film the autopsy.

Ivon couldn't move. She was standing less than five feet away from the body of the girl who was going to be the mother of her child. Her head was turned sideways, facing Ivon, the eyes of milky red, the mouth wide open. The body was marbled green and yellow, the skin loose, and the hands curled inward, toes pointed. Dark rope burns on her neck. The thick flaps of the torso were folded back, but it was easy to make out the puncture wounds. . . .

⁴² The notion that femicide and anti-female terror is unique to the borderlands of northern Mexico is taken up in greater detail in the next chapter when discussing transnational adoption and liberal internationalism in relation to essentialist discourses on fear and threat upon which U.S. interventionism is predicated.

Ivon closed her eyes for a moment, not permitting herself to dwell on the number of wounds. . . . When she opened her eyes again the girl's head had been turned in the other direction.

"Why is the skin green?" Rubi asked. "Is it a normal color for a dead body?"

"It's a normal color for a body that's been inside a closed care in forty-centigrade head for more than eight hours," the medical examiner explained. She was separating the long black strands of Cecilia's hair while the interns lifted the organs out of her torso and laid them on a butcher block at the end of the table.

"We're lucky the head didn't explode."

The head flopped in Ivon's direction again. The medical examiner pulled a roll of duct tape out of one of her pockets, stretched out along piece, and cut it with her teeth. (50)

For several reasons, this narrative appears to reproduce the kinds of reified images that posit the *juarense* woman as inextricably tied to death. For one, note the way in which the appropriation of the cadaver is treated through the character Rubí Reyna, the *juarense* news reporter following the Juárez femicide. In an earlier scene, Rubí offers her card to Father Francis while discussing her television segment on what she calls "an insider's look at a *rastreo*" (46). She asks Father Francis if he thinks the segment on the *rastreo* is a "tremendous idea." Before allowing him to respond, she quickly points out that the segment on the *rastreo* will be "very informative" for her audience, "not to mention boosting" the ratings of her television program (46). In ironic fashion, Gaspar de Alba points to sensationalized accounts and the appropriation of the cadaver characteristic of popular images of the dead when describing Rubi's business card. It reads, "**Mujeres Sin Fronteras.** *Where women have no borders, no boundaries, and no checkpoints*" (46). In contrast to transnational feminist thought and practice at the borderlands in which Mexicanas, Chicanas, and Latinas from both sides of the border work in concert to organize social justice movements, here the narrative plays with the notion of women

without borders or boundaries, that is to say without respect and reverence for the deceased and their families. As the medical staff conducts the autopsy, Rubí appears obsessed with capturing the gruesome image of the violated body. Her eagerness to capture on film the image of the decomposed body speaks to the kinds of sensationalized and de-contextualized accounts of the cadaver that collude with reified images of victimhood and loss of subjectivity. Moreover, her eagerness to cross the limits or boundaries of representation, if you will, also speaks to the ways in which cultural producers unwittingly re-enact the very crimes they seek to expose. While certainly not identical to Ariel's complicity with femicide, Rubí, nonetheless, is implicated and, however indirect and subtle, part of this violent system of misogyny and patriarchy. To put it simply, both are implicated in the crimes and responsible for reproducing reified conceptions of women that undergird femicide and anti-female terror.

Secondly, note the graphic description of the cadaver. Cecilia's body is described in graphically disturbing terms—"milky red" eyes and "mouth wide open" as we might imagine the horror of that moment of death. Cecilia's body is also characterized as discolored, contorted, and full of gashes. Her internal organs are simply removed from the body and placed on a "butcher's block at the end of the table." In her critique of this scene, Adriana Martínez argues that

from the perspective of *Desert Blood*, it would appear that the abetting of the murders of the *juarense* women by the highest authorities in the region goes hand in hand with the representation of these women as *silenced* victims devoid of their human rights. In the novel the most extreme form of this representational alienation from their rights as citizens and as human beings will be undoubtedly manifested in the figure of the cadaver. . . . The aesthetics of murder used in this description completes the dehumanization of the character of Cecilia, in a fashion eerily reminiscent

of Mexican *nota roja* newspapers or even their more polished TV avatars, such as the X-Files or CSI. (102-103)

If it is true that the degradation of the body as captured in the aesthetics of murder alluded to above suggests the complete alienation of the person and, with that, the disaggregation of the victim in the cadaver, then certainly Martínez is correct in criticizing the degree to which this scene from the novel is guilty of reification. Moreover, according to Martínez, overemphatic textual attention to the figure of poor, helpless *juarense* women constitutes one of the more troubling aspects of the novel. As she points out, this attention on the “figure of the poor *juarense* woman” contributes “to the subalternization of *juarense* women by keeping them stereotyped as victims of femicide, thus adding to the instances of problematic cultural representations overcoming reality—such as the inaccurate prevalence of *maquiladora* workers among the murdered” (109). In constructing such over-empowering images and narratives of victimization and/or subalternity, the narrative appears to offer little space for representational agency of *juarense* women struggling to improve their lives in a society confronting femicide and other forms of racialized, gendered violence. However, while I agree in part with Martínez’s assessment, I want to complicate her analysis and offer a different read that demonstrates how in this disturbing representation of the cadaver the narrative actually transcends the disaggregation of the victim in the cadaver and, in doing so, does not fall victim to producing reified portrayals of disempowerment and loss of subjectivity.

While Martínez offers a persuasive argument about the ways in which the cadaver scene problematizes *juarense* subjectivity, her analysis unfortunately commits the very

kind of de-contextualized accounts that are characteristic of the very representations she critiques. In her analysis, she draws a parallel between Mexican *nota roja* representations and that of the scene from the novel. We might even include street photographs of mutilated and decomposed bodies from Bowden's illustrated texts. The common thread between *nota roja* representations and those captured in Bowden's texts is the way in which the images are de-contextualized, de-historicized, and lacking biographical reference, which in turn construct a kind hyper-visibility that draws attention only to the disaggregated body laid bare (as bare life) before the viewer. Omitted in these representations are the very kinds of symbols or signs that link the dead body back to the living subject. In *Señorita Extraviada*, for example, Portillo goes to great lengths to restore and re-member the victims as full, complex subjects prior to their untimely death. Interviews of family members and friends, portraits of the deceased or missing, and images of the clothes they once adorned attempt to draw connections to and link us back to the victims of femicide. Likewise, in *Maquilapolis*, the physical markers of exploited labor and ecological racism caught on film are accompanied by a narrative that focuses our attention to the grassroots organized movement against social and economic injustices related to maquila production and, by extension, neoliberal capitalism at the borderlands. My point, however, is that in the cadaver scene from *Desert Blood*, Gaspar de Alba quite successfully inverts what we might too easily perceive to be a perilous aesthetics of murder. This is accomplished in her careful use of setting through which she builds a critique of the state and its role in the continued system of violence against women. Martínez, I argue, focuses too narrowly on physical markers of death exemplified through descriptions like bloody eyes, howling face, discolored skin, and

contorted body. Rather than focusing initially and primarily on these codes or symbols, they need to be read in relation to the physical settings in which the treatment of the body by the physicians unfolds. Thus, we need to read the setting, and by that I mean look at the literary environment that helps us re-contextualize our reading of the autopsy and the treatment of the body. For example, we need to pay critical attention to the way in which the narrative *sets up* the graphic description of the cadaver, i.e., how Gaspar de Alba constructs in graphic detail the objects and materials that give the facility its look and feel. Note, again, how the narrative introduces the cadaver: “Behind them, bottles of chemicals and broken skulls lined the rusty metal shelves. Bones were heaped inside plastic trash bags on the floor.” Echoing an earlier scene in which a trachea and bra are found inside a plastic Mervyn’s bag in Loma de Poleo, this scene directs our attention to the figure of the disposability captured in popular representations of the cadaver. In this scene our attention is first drawn to chemical bottles, broken skulls, and bones heaped in trash bags. This constitutes an important, even critical, representational strategy that frames the rest of the scene in this chapter. Rather than focusing primarily on the cadaver out of context, the narrative re-focuses our attention to the very setting, that is to say the state institution through which the ongoing violation of Cecilia’s body is made possible. As such, this is not a sensationalized representation of the mutilated body, but rather a critique of the state in its complicity with the crimes, both prior to and after the murder. Through this subtle but effective representational move, the narrative engages with the brutality of the crimes while focusing our critical attention to various state apparatuses. Rather than obsessively focusing on images of the violated body, the narrative opens a critical space that draws attention to the State, and, in doing so, avoids the kinds of reified

images and narratives that reinscribe violence against racialized, poor women along the borderlands.

In the context of the Juárez femicide, the state's failure to bring justice to the murdered and adequately protect its citizens from this system of terror emerges as a *form* of state-sponsored impunity. However, we must add to this discussion the relationship between state devolution and the ethos of neoliberal responsabilization and how this links in deadly ways with the technology of impunity. The material conditions of possibility for femicide speak directly to the ways in which a "hands-off-approach" by the state (with its operative corollary the autonomous, self-managing individual) renders unpunishable such killings. Moreover, it conceals the ways in which the state underwrites the conditions of possibility of exposure to violence, harm, and even death. This analysis of representations of femicide and other forms of anti-female terror calls attention to the ways in which intersecting and mutually sustaining discourses of blame (e.g., "public women," "mismanaged life," etc.) and responsabilization (i.e., the neoliberal socio-political rationality and ethos of autonomous, hyper-individualized personal care and security), in conjunction with already co-existing systems of patriarchy, classism, and racism constitute the structural dimensions of such unimaginable acts of terror against human life.

In Alicia Gaspar de Alba's mystery novel *Desert Blood* and Lourdes Portillo's investigative documentary *Señorita Extraviada*, images and narratives of the cadaver play a vital part in making visible for English-speaking audiences the silence surrounding femicide and disappearance. In making visible femicide toward greater social awareness and social activism against institutionalized violence against women, the

novel, as Adriana Martínez reminds us, represents “an undeniable urgency to uphold” portrayals of the brutal murders and kidnappings in Ciudad Juárez “and the overall absence of justice regarding these cases,” (94) not to mention the kinds of political and social apathy and complicity exercised by either disinterested or uninformed individuals or groups. Yet, in the act of making visible femicide toward social justice, authors and filmmakers alike face the paradoxical conundrum of representing corporeal violence, namely images or narratives in which the mutilated body and the cadaver constitute the focus (or subject) of investigation. I hope, however, that our discussion of these three texts offers some way of appreciating the difficulty in transcending reified portrayals of victimhood and disempowerment and, in doing so, also offers a space for looking at the ways in which these texts reveal to a greater extent the totality of femicide. By “totality” I mean the ways in which the narrative addresses the historical contingencies and socio-cultural forces underwriting femicide and anti-female terror. And while it is important to identify the “who” of the crimes in order to bring such people to justice, we must attend to the forms of thinking, the social and cultural rationalities and logic undergirding and reproducing the conditions of possibility for the brutal murders and disappearance of these women.

In conclusion to this chapter, I want to leave with a quote by Adriana Martínez that speaks directly to the limits and problems associated with cross-cultural and binational coalitionism and interventionism discussed in the next chapter. In her critique of the relationship between Chicana agency and failed motherhood of *juareense* women, Martínez astutely observes that “the portrayal of a Mexican maternity doomed to failure unintentionally serves to replicate a condition of inferiority and even a certain degree of

patronizing of these women, especially when compared to the final textual success of the U.S.-American mothers in ‘rescuing’ an almost destitute Mexican child” (109). It is to this problematic construction of failed motherhood and its relationship to discourses of fear and threat to which we now turn.

Chapter 3

“What ‘We’ Do Abroad”: Liberal Internationalism and Transnational Adoption under Contemporary Neoliberalism at the Borderlands⁴³

As an exploration of the ways in which the economic is always already entangled in the broader formations of politics, society, and culture, this chapter engages with the cultural representations of the neoliberal order at the U.S.-Mexico border. This chapter links Foucauldian analyses of neoliberal governmentality⁴⁴ with critiques of liberal internationalism and transnational adoption in order to draw out the ways in which the novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and the film *Bordertown* (2008) directed by Gregory Nava configure neoliberal rationalities embedded in the technologies of governing that produce discourses of blame, mismanaged life, and failed motherhood in relation to U.S. narratives of child rescue and humanitarian interventionism. While these texts configure the intimate relationship

⁴³ The chapter title draws from Laura Briggs analysis of the intimacies between transnational adoption and U.S. Latin American policy, particularly her comparative analysis of the competing narratives between Latin American discourses of U.S. exploitation and power and U.S. discourses of child rescue. On this issue, she writes, “Latin American ideologies of U.S. exploitation...stand in sharp contrast to much of the literature for potential intercountry adopters in the United States, which describes orphanages full of unwanted children and invites American families to image making space in their home and hearts for an unloved, racially and culturally different, child with little or no future in his or her home country—adopting the classic U.S. sentimental narrative of *what ‘we’ do abroad*” (emphasis added, 350).

⁴⁴ See Chapter 1: “Introduction,” for detailed discussion of the term neoliberalism. In short, while new aspects of globalization have emerged with neoliberalism since at least the early 1970s, globalization and neoliberalism denote two distinct sets of political-economic mechanisms. Globalization refers to the centuries-old process of the internationalization of the world (capitalist) economy marked by exploitation, direct violence, and political intrigue. Neoliberalism, in contrast, refers to new (de)regulations and rules of contemporary capitalism. As Duménil and Levy suggest, the main characteristics of neoliberalism include “a new discipline of labor and management to the benefit of lenders and shareholders; the diminished intervention of the state concerning development and welfare; the dramatic growth of financial institutions;...the strengthening of central banks and the targeting of their activity toward price stability,...and the new determination to drain the resources of the periphery toward the centre” (10). Moreover, the term contemporary neoliberalism refers to the political economy of the U.S.-Mexico border since the ratification and implementation of NAFTA in 1994. Earlier forms of neoliberalism at Mexico’s northern border region appeared in 1965 with the implementation of the Border Industrialization Program.

between sentimental narratives of rescue and neoliberal discourses of blame and misconduct, they also tend to depoliticize and erase the history of U.S. political, economic, and cultural hegemony at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands by reproducing narratives of fear and threat from which narratives of sentimental rescue and heroic interventionism emerge.

While racial, gender, and class hierarchies have existed well before the implementation of neoliberalism at Mexico's northern frontier and the U.S. southwest, contemporary neoliberalism at the borderlands has effectively appropriated and exacerbated already existing structures of social domination, in addition to co-opting liberal notions of class and gender equality and the freedom of the citizen-subject. As an analysis of the complex representations of the social and cultural dynamics of the neoliberal project at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, this chapter proposes a critical reading of the social and political rationalities of neoliberalism (hereafter socio-political rationalities) shaping state and public forms of power.

However, in order to avoid reducing our analysis of the social and political consequences of neoliberalism too narrowly by focusing primarily on neoliberal economic policy and implementation, we turn a critical eye toward the micro dimensions of power represented in these texts. A critical analysis of the micro dimensions of power entails looking at the ways in which the relationship between the private and the public and the individual and socio-economic realities are intimately linked to the social and political rationalities of contemporary neoliberalism embedded in technologies of neoliberal governmentality.

One of the advantages of taking this analytical approach is that it allows us to focus on the complex operations of governance and power working simultaneously at both the micro and macro levels of everyday struggle and resistance. Drawing from Foucauldian studies on governmentality, particularly the ways in which these texts imaginatively configure “the conduct of conduct,”⁴⁵ refocuses our attention to the material and discursive conditions out of which the subaltern are able to freely conduct themselves in relation to the state’s withdrawal from asserting direct control over the conduct and choices of individuals. Critical attention to both the technologies of neoliberal governmentality and socio-political rationalities allows for a reading of the complex ways in which the narrative representations of rescue and heroic intervention are often linked to images of failed motherhood, social backwardness, and cultural poverty.

Negotiating Interventions

Pointing to the ways in which transnational adoption is intimately tied to literary production, Laura Briggs focuses on how the narrative constructions of transnational adoption negotiate and manage the contradictions and violence of this complex process as both children and their adoptive parents try to make sense of this emotionally charged event.⁴⁶ However, it is Briggs’ analysis of Elizabeth Bartholet’s well-known testimonial account of her own experience with transnational adoption, *Family Bonds*, that proves especially useful in analyzing the complex narrative constructions of heroism and child rescue as it relates to U.S. humanitarianism abroad. The relationship between sentiment

⁴⁵ According to Foucault, “conduct of conduct” refers to the governing of others and the population (subjectification) and the governing of one’s self (subjectivation).

⁴⁶ “Making ‘American’ Families: Transnational Adoption and U.S. Latin American Policy.” *Haunted By Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

and danger plays a pivotal role in the (re)production of narratives and images of rescue as emotional appeals to the sentimental and the romantic often frame adoptive parents as heroic interventionists saving innocent children from the perils and dangers of their home countries. Images of peril and danger, of course, often function symbolically to signify backwardness, non-development, incivility, and barbarism that often serve to erase the histories of European imperialism and U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. Similar to discourses of benevolent empire (and modernization), rescue narratives often take an imperial posture by “bring[ing] civilization to indigenous people” (Briggs, 348), however, without actually setting up camp on foreign soil.⁴⁷ While Briggs’ analysis of liberal internationalism and transnational adoption effectively demonstrates how intimate matters and spaces become important features of imperial regimes, analyses of neoliberal governmentality may prove instructive in fleshing out the intimate relationship between such imperial formations and the social and political rationalities of state and public actors implicated in hegemonic constructions of U.S. humanitarian interventionism. This intervention can occur at various levels, enacted by a variety of agencies and individuals grounded on differences of class, gender, and national origins. Within the contexts of labor exploitation, racialized, gendered violence, and social justice advocacy, overlapping objectives on the part of these agencies and individuals constitute the complex and contradictory aspects of pursuing liberal objectives abroad. Let us now turn our attention

⁴⁷ Future research on this project requires a more detailed discussion of the “maquila complex” in relation to Giorgio Agamben’s conceptualization of the camp, or what I refer to in the context of femicide and anti-female terror as the “maquila camp(us).” While the rhetoric of transnational adoption promises to “bring civilization to indigenous people” by actually removing them from their native lands and territories, the maquiladora development model literally sets up camp on foreign soil in the figure of the maquila plant or campus.

to contemporary representations of liberal humanitarianism at the Ciudad Juárez/E. Paso borderlands.

Bordertown: The Cultural Politics of Liberal Internationalism

Filmmaker Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* (2006) traces the Juárez feminicide through the perspective of a young Mexican American journalist working for a major newspaper based in Chicago. Starring Jennifer Lopez as the Mexican American journalist in assignment in Ciudad Juárez, Lauren Adrian, the movie sets into motion the attempted murder of a young, poor maquila worker, Eva Jimenez (played by Mexican actress, Maya Zapata), after working a long and exhausting night shift at one of the hundreds of maquila plants operating in Ciudad Juárez. Placing the feminicides in the context of the NAFTA-era neoliberal economic model of maquiladora export production, the film speculates on the possible network of crime against women and impunity surrounding the murders involving maquila male workers (especially *choferes* or company bus drivers), transnational elites, powerful politicians from both sides of the border, and state and municipal law enforcement agents/agencies. Awakening from this brutal violence, Eva makes her way out of the desert sand and struggles along the perilous desert landscape back home. While on assignment to investigate the Juarez murders, Lauren decides to meet with her journalistic partner from years back, Alfonso Díaz (played by the well-known Spanish actor, Antonio Banderas), owner and reporter for the Juarez based newspaper, *El Sol*. While reluctant to partner with Lauren, for obvious reasons having to do with Lauren's self interest in capturing a good story to elevate her professional status, Díaz finally decides to help Lauren. The decision to help Lauren, however, is based largely on a shared interest in protecting Eva from her perpetrators and state officials

hoping to quell any evidence of femicide in Juárez. Eventually, we learn of Eva's assaulters as she, with the encouragement of Lauren, decides to identify her attackers in the court of law and bring them to justice. Unfortunately, Eva is unable to bring her attackers to justice, largely due to the burden of proof required to bring her attackers to justice, as Lauren's "big story" about Eva and the femicide is rejected by the Chicago newspaper due to pressures from U.S. political and economic elites interested in expanding NAFTA to other (lucrative) areas of Latin America.

While the movie *Bordertown* does not explicitly deal with issues of transnational adoption, it certainly does engage with issues of humanitarian interventionism, particularly of U.S. Americans intervening on behalf of victimized female Mexicans and their families. More importantly, the film takes up the theme of U.S. humanitarian intervention through a problematic set of images that effectively create the discursive conditions of heroic interventionism while eliding the histories of political, economic, and social conflict critical to any informed analysis of racialized and gendered violence along the U.S.-Mexico border. And while the protagonist of the film, Lauren Adrian, does not adopt Eva Jimenez, the survivor of an attempted murder, in order to protect her from the danger and violence awaiting her in downtown Ciudad Juárez and in her neighborhood at Colonia de Anapra, she does put Eva under her protective custody, even against the well-intended advice of Alonso Díaz, owner and journalist of the Juárez newspaper, *El Sol*, and Teresa Casillas, an affluent Mexican human rights attorney based in Juárez. Although *Bordertown* offers a critical assessment of post-NAFTA economic development along the U.S.-Mexico border, it also tends to offer an oversimplified

indictment of the Juarez femicide as it focuses too narrowly on economic globalization that elides other critical issues like patriarchy, racialization, and governmentality.⁴⁸

The narrative convergence of U.S. interventionism represented through identification with Lauren Adrian's attempt to protect Eva and bring her attackers to justice and the social and political consequences associated with globalization at the border makes for an interesting re-reading of the movie. As a movie invested in bringing public awareness to the social consequences of globalization along the borderlands, *Bordertown* also offers, whether unwittingly or not, a contemporary reading of the subtle and shifting formations of U.S. power abroad. And while critical attention to this narrative convergence underscores the ways in which decades of U.S.-led economic development along the U.S.-Mexico border create the conditions of possibility for the emergence of narratives of rescue and heroism embedded in liberal internationalism, it also opens up a space for thinking about neoliberal governmentality in relation to such narratives. As discussed below, the neoliberal regime of punishment and neoliberal discourses of "mismanaged life" play a crucial role in the formation of sentimental rescue narratives embedded in images and narratives of U.S. liberal internationalism. Lastly, while *Bordertown* represents a critical assessment of the Mexican government's complicity in the mass murders and disappearances of mostly young, dark-skinned, working-class women in Ciudad Juárez, it comes dangerously close to eliding the uneven class, racial, and gender relations between agential U.S. interventionists and victimized *juarenses* women and children. This elision or erasure functions as one of the key elements of sentimental

⁴⁸ Analyses of the contemporary political economy of the U.S.-Mexico border are invaluable and serve to highlight the social and political consequences of globalization and neoliberal economic policy and implementation. However, the consequences from such economic shifts also register shocks and discursive conflicts at the level of the cultural grounded on issues of gender, race, and citizenship.

narratives of U.S. humanitarian interventionism that not only bears an intimate relationship to U.S. political and economic power abroad, but one largely underwritten by the neoliberal regime of punishment at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Our analysis of the movie begins with representations of Ciudad Juárez as a distinct place of vice, threat, and fear from which heroic images of rescue and sentimental bonds between rescuer and victim are formed. Rather than beginning our analysis by looking at the opening scene, which we will do shortly, we begin by looking critically at the DVD cover art of the film. The visual composition to the DVD cover to the film points to some interesting formulations of agency and dependency in the context of Ciudad Juárez murders. To arrive at some conclusion to the effects of this composition, we must begin addressing the ways in which the cover is divided into three important segments or frames. The first top frame is composed of only two names: Jennifer Lopez and Martin Sheen. Presumably geared toward audiences in the U.S., the names of these two popular actors grace the top of the cover with their last names in large bold lettering. The second frame follows with the title of the film in scratchy, bold lettering, BORDERTOWN. Lastly, the third and largest frame consists of several images from the film, however with two large images of both Jennifer Lopez and Martin Sheen dominating the entire frame, strategically placed above the smaller images. Of the two actors dominating this frame, the image of Jennifer Lopez is enlarged and cast in relief. Let us examine each of these frames separately followed by placing them in relation to one another in order to arrive at some conclusion of the overall semiotic effect of this visual/textual construction.

Intending to capture U.S. and international audiences with star power, the names Jennifer Lopez and Martin Sheen grace the top portion of the front sleeve. However,

what is interesting about this placement of these two actors' name is that Lopez and Sheen are only two actors among several critically-acclaimed and/or popular actors in the movie. For example, Antonio Banderas and Maya Zapata, both well known actors internationally, are either entirely omitted or barely represented in the front sleeve. Maya Zapata (Eva Jimenez), who plays a critical role, perhaps the most important one, in the film is nowhere mentioned or visually represented. Likewise, Antonio Banderas' name (Alfonso Díaz) is omitted and the actor is minimally represented taking Lopez's hand fleeing from danger. While Jennifer Lopez plays a leading role in the movie, Martin Sheen's character only appears periodically, mostly during earlier and latter scenes. Arguably, two of the most interesting, important, and compelling roles are those performed by Maya Zapata and Antonio Banderas. Maya Zapata's character, Eva Jimenez, constitutes, in my opinion, the actual focal point of the movie as her perspective as a racialized victim not only sets in motion the narrative but determines the degree to which Jennifer Lopez's character, Lauren Adrian, can and/or should intervene on Eva's behalf. Some critics have noted the ways in which artists, scholars, and activists from the U.S., have often framed their works consistent with the "savior from the North" discourse that, according to Mata, "reinforces the racist portrayal of the Mexican people as inept" (16). This discourse of ineptitude that Mata identifies in such films as *The Virgin of Juarez* and *Bordertown* echoes what Adriana Martínez refers to as over-powering images of dependency that construct essentialized popular conceptions of *Mexicanas* as disempowered and lacking agency. Yet, as is also the case with Ivon and Ximena from *Desert Blood*, "[Lauren's] role [exemplifies a] new notions of transnational solidarity among Chicano/as and rape victims in Mexico on the basis of ethnic identification"

(Sadowski-Smith, 81). While notions of transnational solidarity speak of the kinds of powerful and much needed multiethnic and bi-national coalitionism taking place at the borderlands, we must still ask to what extent notions of victimization and helplessness are ascribed to Eva. Undoubtedly, she is a survivor of extreme violence and trauma, and seeking help from others is neither unusual nor a sign of weakness. Moreover, the kinds of transnational solidarity alluded to above speak of the powerful connections made among different people that go beyond the nation-state or national identification, and that are grounded on issues of gender, race, and class. Yet, the correlation between agency/power and race/class functioning throughout most of the film is somewhat problematic as characters exhibiting agency and political power are almost always bilingual (Spanish/English), light(er)-skinned, and in possession of either financial or cultural capital, or both in some cases. However, there are moments later in the film when Eva, the indigenous *obrero* from Oaxaca, exercises agency as she decides not only to help identify her attackers but attempts to bring them to justice in the courtroom where she is greeted by a multi-ethnic, bi-national coalition of activists protesting the impunity of the crimes committed against women. And, yet, Eva's decision to bring attention to the crimes committed against her and other women is largely framed in terms of Lauren's capacity (and constant persuasion) to bring her attackers to justice while making public Eva's extremely sensitive personal trauma, even against the well-intentioned warnings of Alfonso Díaz and Teresa Casillas. Antonio Banderas' character, Alfonso Díaz, the local investigative reporter and owner of the newspaper *El Sol de Juárez*, likewise occupies a key role in the film. Unlike Eva's ambivalent agency, Díaz is portrayed as a strong-willed, agential character who seeks to find the truth behind the Juárez murders and

disappearances. And, yet, he is sought after by Lauren Adrian in order to help her out with her “Juárez story,” one which will not only land her a foreign correspondence job with the *Chicago Sentinel* but come to represent the “real” story about the murders and disappearances. *El Sol’s* coverage of the feminicides is one that is not only represented in the film as being accurate and on the “cutting edge” of reporting the feminicide and disappearances but one that has stirred controversy and elicited violent responses from several state apparatuses, including law enforcement and the maquiladora industry.

In large, bold lettering BORDERTOWN occupies almost the entire second segment of the front cover. However, what is interesting about this title is the graphic design of the lettering. The design can be described as scratchy, worn-out, etched, scarred, or disfigured. One could describe the design as representing cuts, blood marks, or barbed wire, among other possible images. Below the title reads “Inspired By True Events.” While the veracity of this statement is both unverifiable and ambiguous (What element of the story is true? And why is truth an essential element of this story?), it, nonetheless, holds an important function in bringing the narrative to life, literally. The effectiveness of this narrative in reaching the hearts and minds of its audience is largely predicated on some degree of correspondence between reality and fiction, between actual events and representations of those events. Perhaps, in some ways, it carries the kind of truth-value that is commonly attributed to documentaries. However, what I find most interesting is the ways in which the title design and “true events” carefully conjoin in constructing the visual and textual images and political imaginaries of this border town, a construction replete with images of vice, incivility, social disorder, lawlessness, perversion, etc., in short, savagery and backwardness. U.S. sentimental narratives of “what ‘we’ do abroad”

must take into account the discursive conditions and the political imaginaries of the “untamed wild or wilderness” upon which imperial expansion and colonial power has come to depend. This opening textual and visual construction, therefore, operates as a necessary condition for the heroic narrative that comes to dominate much of the film. Such constructions, however, as Briggs informs us, are predicated on narratives of fear and threat that form the necessary discursive conditions of child rescue and/or interventionist heroics. Interestingly, the title *Bordertown* initially makes no reference to any particular town along the U.S.-Mexico border. We soon learn, however, that the “border town” in question is in fact Ciudad Juárez. Nevertheless, the title “bordertown” is one that appears to easily reference other cities or towns along the U.S.-Mexico border, for example, Nogales, Sonora and Nogales, Arizona or Tijuana, Baja California and San Diego, California. My point is that when constructing images or narratives of the “border town” within the context of the twin city framework, we must also attend to the forms of injustice and violence existing in El Paso, Texas and how such injustices and violence are inextricable tied to both the political-economy and cultural systems of the border region.

The third segment is a collage-like image that emphasizes the importance of the characters portrayed by both Jennifer Lopez and Martin Sheen. Three important representational strategies are at work here. Firstly, in concert with the first segment announcing the principle actors of the movie, Lopez and Sheen are once again made the feature actors/characters of the film. That both (U.S.) characters are placed over and above the scenes captured in the lower left-hand corner of the frame invokes a position of power in relation to the *juareense* images and implies that both a watchful and intervening eye (“I”) are at work here. Secondly, and related to the first point above, we encounter

images of fear, threat, and danger exclusively linked to Ciudad Juárez. Images of the arid desert landscape, the formidable encroaching bus, the burning crosses and colonia, and two people fleeing from danger carefully work together in capturing Ciudad Juárez and, by extension, Mexico as a place of danger, threat, and terror. Thirdly, we encounter a rather peculiar textual summation of the film: “Lies. Corruption. Murder. One Reporter Will Break The Silence.” Even before encountering the first scenes of the movie, we are already confronted by a rather disquieting statement that seeps across the filmic narrative that sets up the “adventure” that is to become the heroic rescue mission. Moreover, by ascribing corruption, murder, fear, etc. to Ciudad Juárez through such semiotic closure of text and image, this synecdochical designation effectively constructs images of immanent incivility and barbarism vis-à-vis “First World” self-constructions of chastity, purity, moral fortitude, and respect for law. While there may be some truth to this representation of the “First World,” it is also problematically constructed in relation to “Third World” underdevelopment and “backwardness” where representations of incivility and lawlessness constitute the negative referent to positive meanings and attributes of “First World” politics and society. In a related context, Sarah Hill points to the ways in which popular images and political imaginaries of the sociological and ecological environments of the borderlands get inscribed onto the bodies of Mexicans and other Latinos.⁴⁹ As the material conditions of the U.S.-Mexico border make their way into U.S. mainstream representations of the border environment, especially during the early 1990s through images of open sewers, illegal dumping, shanties and squatter towns, more contemporary images of physical violence associated with narco-trafficking, cartel wars, and femicide

⁴⁹ See Sarah Hill, “Purity and Danger on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1991-1994.”

continue to capture the popular imagination represented in newspapers, television programs, and mainstream political discourse on both sides of the border.

Lastly, that the *Americana* reporter, Lauren Adrian, represents the one who breaks the silence is consistent with the logic of agency grounded on national identification. Again, this North-South trajectory of power and agency is symbolically represented in the three frames analyzed, suggesting that the U.S. American reporter and her affiliated Chicago-based newspaper will finally break the news and silence that Mexican journalists (and grassroots organizations) seemingly cannot. With this trajectory of power and agency firmly established, we finally arrive at the following logical conclusion from which the heroic interventionist narrative depends upon: Lies, Corruption, and Murder = Ciudad Juárez. Breaking the Silence (i.e., the corrective) = U.S. interventionism. One connotes incapacity, the other agency and ability. One connotes fear, threat, and incivility, the other safety, security, and civility.

To the credit of director Gregory Nava, the movie begins by contextualizing the political-economy of the Ciudad Juárez, with particular attention paid to the devastating social effects of the maquiladora industry upon the city and its people. With sparse, ominous-sounding music for the background, the movie begins with a series of four sentences, each appearing after the other to accommodate audience's reading pace. The text begins by addressing the implementation of NAFTA along the U.S.-Mexico border. Here, Nava quickly launches into a critique of the maquiladora industry's exploitative labor practices that make possible the large number of relatively inexpensive electronic/computer products sold in the U.S. In contrast to the front cover of the DVD, the opening scene here immediately takes a critical position against U.S.-led economic

neoliberalism at Mexico's northern border region. The text emphasizes the feminization of labor and blames the maquilas for failing to provide adequate security for labor transportation to and from work along the impoverished colonias scattered around the numerous maquila facilities in Ciudad Juárez. Nava's carefully constructed textual introduction to the film (even before the opening credits) alerts us to the new female work force that had emerged during the early 1970s as a result of the Mexican federal government's implementation of the Border Industrial Program (BIP) in 1965. Well into the 1960s, males constituted the majority of people seeking employment either at Mexico's northern border region or in the U.S. southwest in such gender specific areas of employment like commercial and residential construction, agricultural farm production, and iron and steel smelting. However the shift (and eventual re-calibration) in gender composition of labor marks one of the enduring legacies of an emerging neoliberal order at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.⁵⁰ Yet, it was the trilateral trade bloc agreement among Canada, Mexico, and the United States in the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in January 1, 1994, that marked the beginning of a new hemispheric political economic order across North America. As Alejandro Lugo points out, many displaced and/or dispossessed migrants seeking employment in the northern border region eventually joined the ranks of the urban proletariat (70). This economic

⁵⁰ During the early 1980s, TNCs had begun hiring men for assembly line production in greater numbers. Why? According to Lugo, "This transformation in the structure of the labor force was a product of the 'scarcity' of female labor caused by the influx of multinational corporations into the area. This influx was stimulated by two interrelated forces: . . . (a) a very strong devaluation of the peso during the Mexican crisis of 1983, which cheapened even more the price of labor; and (b) the concurrent arrival of the automobile (assembling) industries, which were running away from strong labor union in the American Midwest" (74). This transformation in the structure of the labor force is part and parcel of what Caffentzis identifies as the planned industrialization and internationalization of capital during the 1975-83 U.S. economic crisis.

shift, however implicitly articulated in the movie, forms a critical aspect of the social setting from which anti-female terror and femicide emerge.

The following scene begins with announcements made over a loud speaker in Spanish (although we are not yet aware of the source of the sound). The sound of news headlines comes into focus informing listeners of the Juárez murders. Eventually, text and image come together creating an interesting set of representations that fuse narratives of threat and danger while visually offering graphic images of the deplorable social and ecological environment conditioned by the “maquila complex.”⁵¹ A schematic may help visualize the structure and form of this particular scene:

Image 1:

Colonia left in smoldering condition with children playing in the ashes of the remains.

Text 1:

“More Murders in Juárez!” “Juárez Terrorized by Wave of Killings.”

Image 2:

Dilapidated, abandoned building situated along an arid landscape with advertisements posted on the building reading “Cuidar el agua es tarea de todos.”

Text 2:

“Three More Women’s Bodies Found”

Shortly after, a visual of a VW “Bug” comes into focus, driving along the streets of downtown Ciudad Juárez announcing on loud speaker the news headlines alluded to above. We learn that the car belongs to *El Sol de Juarez* and is headed towards a busy newspaper stand to drop off the latest edition on the feminicides. Quickly thereafter, a mob of angry police officers confiscate the newspapers and disperse the crowd. We hear one officer yell, “Get all this trash out of here!” Quickly and with haste the crowd

⁵¹ I find these contradictions, ambivalences, and ambiguities to be the most interesting and important aspects of the film. These contradictions, ambivalences, and ambiguities constitute one of the more enduring problems or dilemmas in representing violence and oppression in literary and visual representations.

disperses and most of the newspapers are either confiscated or destroyed. Soon after this series of provocative images and text, the scene moves to the maquila plants accompanied by an ominous soundtrack. The maquila plants are fenced off and marked in stark contrast to the surrounding desert and colonias—green lawns, well-groomed trees and shrubs, clean, secured lots full of modern, well-kept vehicles parked within walking distance of the sleek but enormous buildings. Soon after, we are inside the factory work floor, a clean and sterile environment dominated by hi-tech machinery and female laborers. Here Eva Jimenez makes her first appearance as the end of her late night shift is announced over the factory loudspeaker. She is quickly joined by her exhausted co-workers as they walk out of the factory floor and head toward the company busses waiting to take them back to the colonias.

Only three minutes and twenty seconds into the movie, Nava has already represented a complex landscape constructed through the following linkages: abject poverty of the squatter colonies and cartolandia : feminicides and disappearances : governmental corruption and cover-up : maquiladora production and labor exploitation : suspect transportation and security for the workers. In contrast to the monolithic framing of the DVD cover art, this sequence of carefully constructed scenes represents the ways in which the feminicides are directly linked to the political-economy of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and how this, in turn, is entangled in the broader formations of politics, society, and culture. While some scholars warn of the kind of reductionism resulting from framing the feminicides primarily in terms of economic policy and implementation, particularly through discourses of globalization, we should, nonetheless, be careful not to overlook the significant impact that the political-economy of the borderlands holds for

individuals and groups living and working under the material and discursive conditions of neoliberalism. Moreover, while attention to the political-economic conditions of the borderlands helps in orienting a critical approach toward issues of social violence and resistance represented in the film, certain problems and limitations of representation come into focus, particularly concerning images and narratives of fear and threat in relation to economic realities.

The next scene shows Eva boarding the company bus with her fellow *obreras*, exhausted and happy to be leaving the maquila plant. Unboarding at a downtown bus stop, Eva heads toward a downtown street vendor selling figurines and dolls. After purchasing a doll for her younger sister, Eva begins her walk home, apparently to a nearby colonia. We soon learn, however, that she is being followed by a tall, dark-skinned, heavy-set man, presumably in his late thirties or early forties. As she becomes cognizant of the man following her, she begins to move with greater urgency. Eva quickly makes a right turn down an alley when the camera switches angles toward Eva's front side revealing the same man following her. He appears expressionless and in no hurry. While Eva begins to panic and run out of the alley toward a main street, the man continues to follow her at a steady pace with no apparent change in body language. Luckily, a maquila transport bus arrives at a nearby bus stop where Eva frantically enters the bus. In the bus she finds temporary refuge in the company of other maquila *obreras*. As the bus leaves we see no sign of the man presumably in pursuit of Eva. In fact, the man in question is no longer the focus of our attention as the camera concentrates on Eva's fearful expression and eventual relief from certain danger.

I recount this important scene to emphasize the strategic framing of threat, danger, and fear operating throughout the film. Thus far, the film has represented Ciudad Juárez primarily through images of social and environmental degradation and individual exhaustion, anxiety, and fear. While these images effectively capture the social struggles facing the working-class and poor of Ciudad Juárez, they also tend to reify the social totality of Juárez through narratives of social decay, poverty, and perversity. This particular scene exemplifies problems of representing the social conditions of misogyny and anti-female terror in Ciudad Juárez. The dilemma here consists in a struggle between inciting emotional reaction to misogyny and femicide and the ways in which such images come to represent the totality of a particular locality and people. The scene tends to fall back to the kind of images of fear and threat represented in the DVD cover, which, as we have already seen, produce the very discursive conditions of possibility for dominant heroic images and discourses of humanitarian interventionism. We often assume, with the help of carefully constructed performances and setting (poorly lit, wet streets and claustrophobic alleys), that the man following her is in fact a stalker or rapist, which, actually, may or may not be true. And while we may buy into the performance between Eva and her supposed attacker, there is no determinate indication revealing her sense of threat and danger as real or imagined. Given the bodily movements and pace at which the man in question follows Eva, it is also quite possible that he may simply be traveling in the same direction as her. Moreover, critical attention to the ways in which the filmic elements alluded to above carefully construct images of fear, threat, and vulnerability allows us to see how these visceral and over-powering images of dangerous peoples and places create the discursive conditions of heroic interventionism. Within the

context of the murders and disappearances in conjunction with popular imaginaries of lawlessness, threat and danger, distinctions between the real and the imagined become increasingly blurred in this film. My point is that through carefully constructed visual images and text, a shadow of uncertainty and fear dominate this landscape, effectively permeating every cultural and social crevice of the city. Such is this gothic monstrosity that captures the imagination of journalists like Charles Bowden and heroic, self-seeking interventionists-turned-humanitarians like Lauren Adrian. In constructing essentializing narratives and images of dangerous peoples and places, notions of heroic interventionism on behalf of the helpless and needy on *el otro lado* easily emerge.

On another subject, humanitarian intervention on the part of U.S. Americans or Chicana/os acting in good faith toward victimized *Mexicanas* become potentially entangled with sentimental narratives of U.S. power abroad. This entanglement is often articulated in narratives of rescue and heroism that elide the dialectical relationship between U.S. political, economic, and cultural power abroad and the need to intervene on behalf of the “impoverished” or the “indigent” victimized in large part by the exercise of this very power. At stake here is the ways in which filmic representations of heroic or sentimental interventionism become concealed not solely in terms of constructing places in need of rescue through narratives of fear and threat, but also in terms of constructing parallels between victims and rescuer. For example, in the film, Eva’s fate becomes intimately connected to that of Lauren Adrian, the Chicana reporter for the *Chicago Sentinel* on assignment in Ciudad Juárez. Eva’s struggle to overcome her rape by a bus-driver and another man in the Lote Bravo section of the desert evokes in Lauren memories of her deceased parents, both of whom were Mexican farm workers in the U.S.

killed by exhaustion/poisoning and an accidental shooting by a coworker who aimed his gun at a pesticide-dropping airplane. The intimate connection constructed between Lauren's and Eva's past emphasizes a shared Mexican and Chicano/a identity grounded on political unity that, as Claudia Sadowski-Smith reminds us, "becomes the basis for cultural nationalist version of Chicanismo" (81).

However, what I would like to focus on is the ways in which this connection or linkage between Eva's fate and that of Lauren's constitutes what I take to be a serious conflation of their identities that conceals, even elides, the uneven relations of power differentiating these two female characters. Sadowski-Smith's critique of this connection, a representational conflation grounded in terms of gender and ethnic identification, points to the ways in which such connections "[minimize] the immense economic, cultural, and linguistic differences between the Chicana reporter [Lauren Adrian] and the victims of the femicide." "Here," she later adds, "the film glosses over Lauren's immense economic and cultural privileges as a U.S. citizen (and also as the adopted child of most likely well-to-do Anglo parents) that have allowed her to choose a path unavailable to Eva and that would have largely sheltered her from the status of a femicide victim" (82). In the course of investigating the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and encountering Eva Jimenez, a femicide survivor, Lauren begins to acknowledge her Mexican American identity that had been effectively erased soon after the death of her parents and her adoption by her new Anglo-American parents. Lauren's newfound identity gestures to the complex struggles and negotiations of identity that Laura Briggs refers to as "strategic forgetting" and "forcible dehistoricizing" of adopted children acculturated to the cultural and linguistic systems and values of Anglo, middle- and

upper-class “America.” Briggs’ analysis of Bartholet’s *Family Bonds* is instructive here as it attends to the ways in which transnational adoption engages in two ideological moves: “the discounting of birth parents and identifying the children politically with the interest of the United States” (349). Particularly at a very young age, like that of Lauren when adopted by her Anglo-American parents, the children become, according to Briggs, “American in a very old sense: their biographies begin the day they come to the United States” (349). “Forcible dehistoricizing,” however, is met with opposition as Lauren later in the movie opts not to bleach her hair dark-blond or brunette as a gesture of acknowledging her “lost origins.” Yet, this minimizing or concealing of economic and cultural differences effectively allows Lauren to exercise power that does not make itself known. In other words, this conflation mitigates the ways in which U.S. humanitarianism in its various forms functions as an extension of U.S. political and economic power abroad, in this case Mexico’s northern border region. This very construction is symptomatic of First World notions of “singular transnational gender identity” that fail to take into critical consideration the ways in which “race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect in the lives of women” (Fregoso, 37). While the film successfully points to problems of economic poverty, infrastructural decay, and general social disinvestment on the part of the state, it falls short of constructing a more comprehensive and integrative representational critique of human rights abuses along both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. An integrative, yet historically specific, representation of gender violence, attentive to the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexuality, brings in to discussion instances of “socioeconomic rights [that include] basic needs such as food, health care, a living wage, environmental safety, and shelter,” (37) many of which are

dangerously minimized in relation to the narrative construction of the intimate connection between the Chicana reporter, Lauren Adrian, and the surviving femicide victim, Eva Jimenez. By operating through subtle forms of imperial power concealed by the intimacies of familial or cultural bondship, heroic interventionism here maintains its humanitarian posture through historical erasure. And while filmic representations of migrant labor exploitation, land dispossession, and exodus constitute revisionist attempts to foreground the socio-historical contexts of U.S. humanitarian interventionism, erasure comes in many subtle forms as uneven relations of power based on class, race, gender, and national origins buttress the architectonics of U.S. liberal interventionism.

Desert Blood and the Cultural Politics of Transnational Adoption

In the “Disclaimer” to *Desert Blood*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba begins the novel with the following statement: “The serial sex crimes, or femicides, which are the subject of this novel, are true. . . Also . . . the line of investigation offered in this book is based on four years of research into the crimes and a life-time of personal experience in the social, political, economic, and cultural infrastructure of the U.S.-Mexico border that makes it possible for such crimes to take place with impunity” (v). Rather than sensationalizing and capitalizing on the brutal murders and the loss and suffering of families impacted by this epidemic, Gaspar de Alba carefully (re)constructs, through years of detailed research, a novelistic interpretation of the femicide affecting working-class populations on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border since the early 1990s. Carefully attending to issues of racialized patriarchy, gender identity, class conflict, and transnationalism, *Desert Blood* begins with a graphically disturbing rape scene in the desert. Immediately afterwards, the novel switches to the point of view of Ivon Villa, a 31-year old Chicana lesbian and

visiting professor at a Los Angeles college. A former resident of El Paso, Texas, Ivon returns home to adopt a child from an impoverished family living in a *colonia* near the maquiladora plants in Ciudad Juárez. Learning that the pregnant mother, Cecilia, was brutally murdered in the desert sands near Lote Bravo, Ivon begins a string of investigations seeking some explanation for the reasons behind the brutal assassination of mostly young, dark-skinned, poor women. However, while involved in an investigation to find out the reasons for Cecilia's murder and to bring her perpetrators to justice, Ximena, veteran social worker and cousin to Ivon, encourages Ivon to consider adopting a young boy from Juárez whose mother, Elsa, is dying of cancer that is directly related to toxic chemical exposure from working in the maquilas. While in the process of adopting the young boy, Jorgito, Ivon's 16 year-old sister, Irene, who lives with her mother in El Paso, inexplicably disappears after attending a fair in Ciudad Juárez. In the course of her search for her sister, which she links to her investigation of the femicide in Juarez, Ivon learns of an elaborate and sophisticated network of killers, law enforcement agents, and business people (associated with the maquiladora industry). Eventually, Ivon learns that her sister has been kidnapped and tortured by a "snuff film" ring operating on both sides of the border (El Paso and Ciudad Juárez). Miraculously, Irene survives the ordeal and is reunited with her family, including Ivon and Brigit with their newest member of the family, Jorgito.

A number of cultural critics have correctly pointed out the notion of helplessness and victimization operating through narrative portrayals of failed motherhood on the part of Mexican maquiladora workers. For example, Adriana Martinez argues that *Desert Blood* dangerously re-inscribes notions of blame or incapacity in the novel by presenting

solutions to problems of failed motherhood through U.S. American interventionism. The characterization of poor Mexican women willingly giving up their children to “liberal *Americanas*” speaks of the discursive limits and violence of imperial formations of U.S. humanitarian interventionism. In this section, we will examine the novel *Desert Blood* in order to flesh out the complex relationship between neoliberal discourses of self-care and responsibility *and* the imperial nature of transnational adoptions. Framing this discussion through a critique of contemporary neoliberal rationality, this section attends to the ways in which discourses of failed motherhood and U.S. humanitarian interventionism depicted in this novel are intimately tied to and, perhaps, underwritten by neoliberal socio-political rationalities.

Extending these critical concepts to our analysis of the socio-political rationalities of neoliberalism at the borderlands, *Desert Blood* represents a complex and contradictory perspective on issues of contemporary liberal internationalism and transnational adoption. The extent to which neoliberal globalization has “produced a growing internationalization of the middle and elite classes in the United States” (345) and elsewhere in the “First World” has not only made it possible to imagine mixed-racial families via transnational adoption but has, to some degree, made it possible to extend such family compositions to non-heterosexual couples. In *Desert Blood*, protagonist, Ivon Villa, and her partner, Brigit, have been, for some time, literally in the “market” for adoption. That this multi-ethnic, lesbian couple would feel compelled to adopt a baby and raise a family is not all that uncommon. What is interesting, however, is the multiple and intersecting structural forces creating the conditions of possibility for adoption in the novel. In other words, scenes dealing with adoption in this novel frame the various processes of domination and

violence into the fold, where ostensibly discrete forms of domination and inequality that appear to bear no relationship to one another converge. However, the multiple forms of inequality and violence configured in the novel—grounded on sexuality, gender, class, race, and nationality—intersect in interesting and unexpected ways. For example, while the progressive-minded, feminist scholar, Ivon, is embarrassed, even ashamed, to only now learn about the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, she quickly brushes off problems associated with transnational adoption in Ciudad Juárez. The following scene skillfully configures these multiple and intersecting structures of social inequality, of which emerges a disturbing and unsettling posture toward economically disadvantaged mothers of potential adoptees.

“Oh my god, Ivon! I can’t believe you’re actually saying this! Am I dreaming? You really want a baby?”

“How long will an adoption take?”

Brigit had done all the research on private adoptions and gay adoptions had even looked into county adoptions, where the county paid you to adopt a kid rather than vice versa . . .

“Could be months by the time we do the class and get our home visit.”

“Let me call my cousin, Ximena,” Ivon had said. “Maybe she can hook us up with somebody in Juárez.”

“You think?”

“She’s a social worker, Brigit, she works with at-risk youth. Maybe she knows some girl who wants to put up her baby for adoption.”

No response.

“Brigit?”

“Is that legal?”

“Why wouldn’t it be? Ximena’s a social worker, that’s what she does.”

No response.

“How much do we have in the savings?”

“Five thousand dollars, almost.”

“That should be enough.”

“God, Ivon, suddenly I’m the one who’s scared.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I mean, are you sure? Is it really that easy?”

“Women are always giving up babies in Juárez.” (20)

This passage raises several important issues. Firstly, how is this representation of the adoption process, particularly in terms of time or duration, helpful in understanding the subtle processes of social domination in relation to sexuality? How does it configure the discourses of good parenting and child rearing in relation to lesbian and gay adoptions? When Brigit suggests that the adoption process could take months to resolve, including classes on child rearing and home visitations, is she simply expressing the inconveniences of the adoption process or is she expressing anxieties associated with either perceived or real heightened levels of scrutiny applied to non-heterosexual couples? I would argue the latter. Gay adoptions, according to Brigit’s research, seem to fair no better than county or private adoptions. Despite legal protection of LGBT adoptions in many states, the social stigma of same-sex union in conjunction with extra-legal forms of policing, surveying, and disciplining homosexuality constitute formidable barriers to same-sex couples seeking adoption. Heteronormative conceptions of the family and child rearing often take the form of universal and normative criteria determining the (il)legitimacy of various family compositions. Moreover, it becomes even more alarming when we consider the *a priori* status accorded heterosexual marriages, unions, and child rearing. The corollary to this *a priori* social position (ontology) is that gays and lesbians encounter the adoption process not in *medias res*, so to speak, but at a “pre-initial” site that literally emerges as a pre-requisite to “enrollment,” one which many heterosexual couples would neither encounter nor endure. In this context, “home visit” becomes something less associated with the terms “interview” or “assessment,” and comes much closer to “interrogation,” “inspection,” or “cross-

examination.” Given this particular form of social inequality and oppression, the turn to either questionable or illicit methods of adoption is not all that surprising. In fact, it raises questions about notions of equal opportunity, social equality, life chances, and the notion of the “American Dream.” My point here, however, is that any critique or analysis of transnational adoption must consider other social forces that create the conditions of (im)possibility for such adoption. In *Desert Blood*, Ivon and Brigit’s decision to risk illegal adoption in Ciudad Juárez requires that we also consider inequalities of sexuality out of which their choices are circumscribed from the outset.

Secondly, the above passage turns to the relationship between the commodification of poverty and consumer (class) power. The notion that economically disadvantaged mothers would “want” to put up their baby or child for adoption speaks of the indirect but real relationship between economic necessity and consumer power. Poverty and the state’s disinvestment of social services and infrastructure create the material conditions of possibility for transnational adoption (as a mode of liberal internationalism) for both the parents of developing economies experiencing abject poverty and social abandonment *and* economically privileged U.S. American consumers in the market for adoption. Moreover, when looking at transnational adoption through this perspective, the neoliberal order of power at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands not only establishes a political-economic and legal framework for the flow of goods, services, and capital across the U.S.-Mexico border, but also creates the conditions of possibility for illicit commercial activity, including illegal adoption where uneven relations of power along the international border come into focus.

Interestingly, Briggs' analysis of transnational adoption begins by looking at major TV advertisers telling stories of liberal internationalism, specifically retailer J.C. Penny and the insurance giant John Hancock. While the J.C. Penny baby crib advertisement recounts the "tale of how young heterosexual couples make a 'new' American family" by incorporating images of an "Asian baby" into this familiar multicultural narrative, the John Hancock advertisement tells, as Briggs puts it, "another liberal story of the 'new' American family, but this one [being] controversial because the parents it portrayed were lesbian" (344). These contrasting narratives of the "new" or "real" American family stand in stark contrast to what Nancy Armstrong identifies as an important textual tradition for understanding family composition during early U.S. nation-state building: "a sentimental tradition of racial purity in which daughters in particular bear the burden of carrying forward a 'pure' culture in the form of a 'pure' (racial) body embedded in a heterosexual nuclear family" (345). With intensifying free trade and globalization, transnational adoption, popularized in the U.S. by contemporary discourses of sentimental liberal internationalism, has rendered many "transnational or transracially composed families 'pure,' or at least pure enough" (345). While *Desert Blood* deals with so-called alternative family composition as Chicana protagonist Ivon Villa and her Anglo partner, Brigit, attempt to adopt a baby/child from an economically impoverished family in Ciudad Juárez, the novel complicates narratives of fear and threat alluded to above and invocations of "endangered children" and "desperate (adoptive) parents." Moreover, while similar images of fear, threat, disposability, and waste represented in *Bordertown* likewise saturate this novel, *Desert Blood* extends the spatiality of fear and threat to both sides of the border. As U.S. Border and Customs agents as well as Mexican *Federales* in

Ciudad Juárez are implicated in the terror unleashed against women, a latent but powerful social form of fear and threat (or anxiety and scrutiny) within mainstream U.S. society plays a central role in reproducing the conditions of possibility for seeking adoption outside the boundaries of law and national territory for Ivon and Brigit.

In the context of neoliberalism, the privatization and disinvestment of social services and safety nets leave the poor even more vulnerable to exchange valuation as the commodification of human life sunder newborns from their biological parents. We may refer to this marketization of poverty as “remedial disposability” where human life is not simply rendered disposable and redundant (i.e., “wasteful”) from the standpoint of capital, but rather valuable and productive insofar as it serves to mitigate the effects (but certainly not the causes) of abject poverty. With little option but to exercise various “privatized” means of social assistance, of which transnational adoption emerges as one of its most egregious and violent forms, families and communities facing abject poverty and social abandonment are consigned to a level of vulnerability that often exceeds the threshold of moral and legal conduct. Yet, as we see in the novel, the decision to place newborns or young children on the adoption market emerges as a rational, however dreadful, market-driven choice. Moreover, the logic underwriting the adoption transaction extends beyond the realm of the adoptee and into that of the “buyer,” so to speak, as “First World” humanitarians/consumers encounter so-called market opportunities in the adoption process. Social impoverishment opens up opportunities not only for investment (e.g., urban development and gentrification) but also opportunities for consumption as uneven relations of power between “buyers” and “sellers” are predicated on economic necessity, “comparative advantage,” and class and racial

inequalities. As Trent Hamann astutely points out, “Neoliberal rationality allows for the avoidance of any kind of collective, structural, or governmental responsibility . . . [as] impoverished populations, when recognized at all, are often treated as ‘opportunities’ for investment” (44). This insidious and morally reprehensible process of “remedial disposability” does not simply represent a crisis of neoliberal capitalism, but rather, borrowing from Giorgio Agamben’s political concept of the “camp,” represents the specific nature of contemporary neoliberalism along the U.S.-Mexico border. When speaking of vulnerability as existing beyond the realm of the political and economic, we often refer to socio-economic crises and disruptions as the “limits” to or the “undoing” of neoliberalism. However, as Thomas Lemke reminds us, such crises and disruptions are “always already part of the programs themselves, actively contributing to ‘compromises,’ ‘fissures’ and ‘incoherencies’ inside them. Thus, the analysis of governmentality does not only take into account ‘breaks’ or ‘gaps’ between program and technology but also inside each of them – viewing them not as signs of their failure but as the very condition of their existence” (Lemke, 9-10). Constituting the conditions of existence of the neoliberal order at the U.S.-Mexico border, social crises emerge as both the *matter* upon which neoliberal “solutions” intervene and take effect and the disruptive social *effects* that such “solutions” create as the conditions of their existence and implementation. Social crises, therefore, emerge as another “opportunity” upon which a market-based rationality and ethos operate at the level of everyday social life.

Lastly, in response to Brigit’s anxiety about the supposed ease and possibility of adopting a baby from Ciudad Juárez, Ivon states that “Women are always giving up babies in Juárez” (20). This rather problematic response gestures toward several issues

that I would like to take up here. In particular, I want to look at the ways in which the text addresses the discourse of failed motherhood and how it intersects with neoliberal discourses of blame and sentimental narratives of transnational adoption. Ivon's response that *juarense* mothers are always giving up their babies for adoption should give reason for pause. What logic or rationality underwrites this statement and perception about *juarense* mothers? Certainly, economic necessity, as alluded to above, and the failure of the state to provide adequate resources and services to its citizens constitute key factors in creating the material conditions for transnational adoption. And, yet, there is more at work here than simply political-economic realities. While analyses focused on the political-economic realities of the borderlands capture important material effects of neoliberalism, they tend to reduce neoliberalism, as Wendy Brown points out, "to a bundle of economic policies with inadvertent political and social consequences" (38). Instead, a critical approach focusing on the political and social *rationalities* of neoliberalism that reach beyond the market allow for a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of transnational adoption that brings into focus its relationship with the intimate formations of imperial power and neocolonial domination at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

In another scene, Ivon, Ximena (Ivon's cousin), and Father Francis drive into Lomas de Poleo, a impoverished *colonia*, to meet Cecilia, the mother of the baby that Ivon and Brigit intend to adopt. Upon arriving at Cecilia's house, described as a "flat-roofed plywood and tarpaper shack" (38), all three eventually learn of Cecilia's brutal murder. The latest victim of the Juárez femicide, Cecilia was found mutilated inside an abandoned vehicle outside an airport, with a rope around her neck and her body bearing

multiple stab wounds. Kidnapped and murdered after her late night shift, Cecilia was found wearing her smock and nametag (41). Leaving Ivon and Father Francis in the care, Ximena, the social worker brokering the adoption between Ivon and Cecilia, entered the house to learn about Cecilia's whereabouts. While waiting for Ximena's return from the house, Ivon and Father Francis discuss the adoption network.

“You can give me the money, now,” said Father Francis. “Don't let anyone see what you're doing.”

Ivon counted out ten one-hundred-dollar bills. Father Francis watched her.

“You get two-fifty of this, right? What's Ximena's cut?” [Ivon]

“I take three-fifty, actually. Two-fifty for *Contra el Silencio*, one hundred for the birth certificate. Ximena doesn't take anything. Angel service, she calls it.”

“Is this how you make ends meet, Father?” Ivon said, pushing her money-clip back into her pocket. “I mean, this isn't something you do through your church, right? This is your own racket?”

“Ximena and I are just trying to help these young women. They can't afford another mouth to feed, they make five dollars a day in those American factories, and their food coupons don't last the week. They have to work eleven hours just to buy a box of diapers and four hours to buy a gallon of milk. Children are running around addicted to gasoline and paint by the age of five, that is, if they don't get run over by a bus or mauled by a wild dog or simply die from dysentery or malnutrition. We're just trying to help clean things up around here. Which is a lot more than some people do for their own community. . . .”

“These adoptions are Ximena's thing. I [Father Francis] help her out because she gets me donations for *Contra el Silencio* . . . you know, one hand washes the other . . . but we're basically a nonprofit. Other than advocate for the missing girls, we also picket the courthouse of the *Times* and the *Herald Post*, protesting the silence of the authorities and the media on these murders.” (39-40)

The notion that the adoption network constitutes a “racket” deserves attention. The term “racket” denotes “a dishonest or fraudulent line of business” or “a method of swindling for financial gain” (OED). By extension, a “racketeer” is a “person (esp. a member of a gang or crime syndicate) who earns money through a dishonest or illegal business,

typically involving extortion, intimidation, or violence” (OED). While it is debatable whether or not the adoption network constitutes a fraudulent or dishonest network out to swindle vulnerable individuals and communities for financial gain, the more interesting issue here is how “racketeering” comes to characterize the adoption network in this specific context. In other words, what can we draw from Ivon’s criticism of the adoption network (“racket”), one in which she is intimately implicated? How might the term “racket” frame an analysis of the material and discursive conditions underlying the adoption network that bears a close relationship to the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez in this narrative? From a legal perspective that holds to a strict constructionist view of the law applied equally, the adoption network undoubtedly constitutes not only an illegal network, but a fraudulent and dishonest operation. This view, however, assumes a linear and static conceptualization of political, economic, and social realities that not only fails to understand how these realities intersect and overlap, but dangerously reifies the complex social and cultural relationships of the borderlands into a monolithic, non-dynamic social and ecological environment. Uneven relations of power grounded on histories of gender, racial, and class inequalities fade into a distant past that bears no relationship to contemporary forms of inequality. Furthermore, under this paralyzing reified conception of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, the nuances, complexities, and traces of the legacies and continuing formations of imperialism and colonialism recede into the margins. While historicizing the complexities and contradictions of the U.S.-Mexico border, attempts to resist such reified accounts and a discussion centered around the notions of “racket(eering)” and “illegality” through a critique of the neoliberal regime of punishment may prove equally instructive.

Drawing from Thom Hartman's critique of contemporary neoliberalism, Henry Giroux argues that governance under neoliberalism reflects a "regime of punishment" as the protection and nurturing of the population progressively becomes the responsibility and business of private charities, religious institutions, families, friends, and, of course, autonomous, self-disciplining individuals. Giroux argues that the "neoliberal regime of punishment" not only comes to substitute for one of aid and protection, but rather the cultivation of a "*culture* of fear and suspicion towards all those others . . . who in the absence of dense social networks and social support fall prey to unprecedented levels of displaced resentment from the media, public scorn for their vulnerability and increased criminalization" (emphasis added, 600-601). Note Father Francis' explanation of the adoption process, particularly the way in which he frames it in relation to *Contra el Silencio*, a grassroots organization dedicated to bringing local, national, and international attention to the silence and impunity surrounding the feminicides of Ciudad Juárez. The notion of a "*culture* of fear and suspicion" in relation to the "neoliberal regime of punishment" draws attention to the ways in which certain groups become the targets of power of both the state and civil society. The narrative draws upon the direct relationship between the adoption "ring" and the state's failure to aid and protect its citizens by skillfully (con)fusing illegality with necessity. In other words, *Contra de Silencio* and the adoption "ring" draw out the close relationship between the neoliberal regime of punishment and emergence of socially necessary illegality. This (con)fusion bears an important relationship to the neoliberal regime of punishment alluded to above, of which three important points come to the fore. Firstly, *Contra de Silencio* is neither an illegal or illicit association of activists nor a banned organization with limited or no constitutional

protection. However, its informal association with the adoption operation implicates the group within the realm of illegality. Secondly, by virtue of its informal relationship with the adoption “ring,” *Contra de Silencio* comes across as a questionable entity (vis-à-vis state sponsored organizations or well-financed NGOs) that nonetheless constitutes a socially necessary entity in the context of the state’s (both Mexico and the United States) withdrawal from its responsibilities and duties to its citizens. Thirdly, given the points articulated above, *Contra de Silencio* and, to a certain extent, the adoption “ring” exemplify the corollary to the “punishing state” where private charities and religious organizations become the heirs of the welfare-state in the neoliberal era.

Issues of state and public support (financial and otherwise) also come into consideration when thinking about the “business of nurturing” and the neoliberal “regime of punishment.” With the withdrawal and disinvestment of the state in social services and aid, and the virtual privatization of social services and networks, Ximena’s adoption ring and *Contra el Silencio* form a complex social justice network where either illegality or association with “racketeering” come to characterize its condition of existence. This condition of existence, however, emerges out of a neoliberal order of power grounded on hegemonic notions of individual responsibility and sound market-driven decision-making within an ideal, abstract, and reified neoliberal society.

As targets of power, via narratives of fear and threat, subalterns constitute the “abandoned” of the state and those rendered “redundant” or “unimportant,” even “dangerous” or “precarious.” The notion of displaced resentment and scorn from the state and civil society is represented in a later scene from the novel. In this scene located outside the city morgue where Cecilia’s body awaits an autopsy, a Juarez police officer

confronts Ivon, Ximena, and Father Francis as they pull into the facility parking lot. With television crews and reports in large numbers and police cars gathered around the parking lot, we see a group of about fifty women dressed in black protesting the violence against women and the impunity of the killings. Demanding that they leave the parking lot, the police officer scolds the protestors for creating a scandal.

“*Estas viejas escandalosas,*” the policeman gestured at the protestors over his shoulder. “It’s not a strike, it’s these crazy women wanting attention, that’s all. He spit at the ground.

“We’re here to be with the family of the girl they found this morning,” said Ximena. The policeman shook his head again. “*No se puede pasar. No dejan pasar a nadie, las cabronas.*” (44)

With posters raised high reading *Ni Una Mas, No More Assassinations, Stop the Violence against the Women of Juarez, End Impunity*, etc. Gaspar de Alba not only draws attention to the silencing and erasure of the brutal murders and disappearances, but also draws attention to issues of exceptionality, bare life, and social abandonment operating in this fictional world. On the one hand, a “culture of fear and suspicion” in relation to the “neoliberal regime of punishment” draws attention to the ways in which already marginalized groups become even more the targets of power of both the state and civil society.⁵² On the other hand, that marginalized groups under neoliberalism become the targets of power requires attention to the ways in which these texts configure exceptionality and biopower in relation to the production of fear and suspicion of the “Other.”

Briggs’ analysis of narratives of fear and threat informs our analysis by pointing to the ways in which abject material conditions of developing economies or societies

⁵² That marginalized groups constitute the targets of power of “civil society” not only represents a peculiar oxymoron, but more importantly represents the violent contradictions of racial and class hierarchies under contemporary neoliberalism.

experiencing socio-economic decay associated with contemporary modernization serve as strategic sites of narrative transformations of places and people. By narrative transformations I mean the ways in which the real conditions of poverty and scarcity are appropriated in the service of constructing such places as zones of threat, danger, menace, and terror. While these terms may seem appropriate in characterizing areas of socio-economic despair, they dangerously obfuscate the real uneven relations of power between adopting parents and humanitarian interventionists *and* those living in abject poverty and despair (the subaltern). This is done in at least two ways. Firstly, and most noticeably, narratives and images of socio-economic privation often get grafted upon the very inhabitants struggling to etch a living under such material conditions. Hill also reminds us of the ways in which biopower takes on necropolitical dimensions through confrontations of forms of life perceived to be hostile or incompatible with the life that power seeks to protect and preserve. The material conditions of the border region that made their way into U.S. mainstream representations of the border environment during the early 1990s through images of open sewers, illegal dumping, shanties and squatter towns incited much controversy and debate surrounding the ratification of NAFTA. Yet, what Hill finds most interesting about the diminishing concerns and fears of the border environment years after the ratification and implementation of NAFTA is how pollution and biological threat get inscribed onto Mexican bodies, especially cross-border laborers. She writes, "It seems plausible to conclude that environmental concerns have faded at least in part because the environment was never truly the focus of popular opposition; rather, it stood in for, albeit sometimes inadvertently, the belief that the Mexican immigrant was the real source of pollution" (778). What I want to emphasize here is the

real notion of threat and danger inscribed upon both the spatial and bodily dimensions of areas requiring humanitarian intervention. Again, recall Father Francis's rather interesting justification for the adoption network: "We're just trying to help clean things up around here. Which is a lot more than some people do for their own community."

This chapter has attempted to illustrate, humanitarian intervention on the part of U.S. Americans acting in good faith toward the victimized become potentially entangled with U.S. sentimental narratives of imperial power abroad. While socio-economic realities determine and shape the conditions of possibility for humanitarian intervention, often narratives of rescue and heroism elide or erase the dialectical relationship between U.S. state power and violence associated with capitalist expansionism *and* the need to intervene on behalf of the "impoverished" and the "indigent." Yet, analyses of the conditions of possibility must also include the ways in which the discourses of "mismanaged life" reinforce images of individual "blame" and "irresponsibility." Additionally, attention to constructions of helplessness, victimization, and inability allows us to see the complex relationship between emphases on individual misconduct or failure *and* the hollowing out of individual and collective agency and subjectivity. In other words, discourses of "mismanaged life" often appropriate notions of individual agency in absolutist terms represented as unencumbered individualism with little to no reference to the social or the collective. The corollary, of course, is that images of impoverishment, even death, often focus narrowly on harm, injury, damage, decay, i.e., victimization, that dangerously elide or erase the political agency and subjectivity of those struggling against systems and structures of exploitation and oppression.

While these texts offer oppositional narratives to gendered violence, they also dangerously rehearse and reinscribe notions of “Third World” dependency upon “First World” interventionism. Under such logic, the northern Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez functions as the paradigmatic subject of U.S. liberal internationalism captured in representations of transnational adoption. Implicit in this study is the work of journalists, investigators, and fictional and non-fictional writers, all of which, to varying degrees, are a part of the human rights discourse that potentially mask or elide capitalist interests in the exploitation of human and natural resources south of the border. Since these strategies of governance articulated through neoliberal rationalities go beyond the nation-state, this chapter suggests that U.S. forms of governmentality are applicable across national borders and that there is an imperialist side to governmentality. Undoubtedly, the intensity and extensity to which economic globalism continues to affect social and cultural shifts and problematize modern notions of national sovereignty raise questions about the imperialist side of neoliberal governmentality specific to any one national power. As William I. Robinson suggests, the key characteristic of the new global order and new phase of capitalism is the rise of transnational capitalism. Perhaps this transnational character is best captured in a dinner conversation between Luran Adrian and Marco Antonio Salamanca, a wealthy Mexican business man directly involved with the maquiladora industry in Ciudad Juárez:

Lauren: “What was it like being a Mexican at Harvard?”

Salamanca: “Mexican? But I’m an American citizen.”

Lauren: “[I] see. It’s very convenient.”

Salamanca: “I can be a Mexican whenever I want to or American.” (#)

He might add, of course, so long as there is social power to preserve, natural resources to extract, and capital accumulation to secure—the classic capitalist narrative of “what ‘we’ do abroad.”

Concluding Remarks

In this dissertation, I have set out to demonstrate the ways in which contemporary Chicana and Chicano literature and film refocus our attention on both popular and critical representations of political abandonment, denationalization, and social deprivation under late-capitalism along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. In bridging scholarly work on neoliberal rationalities, necropolitics, and the production of bare life and exceptionality, I have suggested that the visual and literary texts examined in this study offer alternative reconfigurations of the intersecting processes of neoliberal socio-political rationalities and the emerging necropolitical order of power that continues today to reproduce the conditions of possibility for violence against women on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. My future research sets out to look at Chicana/o and Latina/o cultural production as it relates to (im)migration and citizenship in the context of bio/necropolitics, bare life, and exceptionality. I hope to extend my research on necropolitics and neoliberalism as it pertains to Latina/o literary and film representations on the dialectic between empire and migration in the Caribbean and Central America.

Since at least the early 1980s, an impressive body of Latina/o and Chicana/o literature and film has provided powerful and moving images of human rights abuses along the U.S.-Mexico border and the greater U.S. southwest. Analyses of “free trade” policy and practices, interviews with members of human rights organizations, and testimony of migrants attempting to cross the multiple international borders across the Americas provide multidimensional accounts of border enforcement policy, the policing of (im)migrants, and public attitudes concerning undocumented border crossers. Chicana/o and Latina/o literary and filmic narratives likewise possess extraordinary representational

powers that imaginatively reconfigure the physical and psychological abuses of migrants seeking work in distant lands. Rather than simply pointing to human rights violations and the need to establish places of refuge, which undoubtedly constitute legitimate programs of redress and remediation, these texts focus on the historical contingencies of migration, that is, on the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of power grounded on the intersection of race, class, gender, and citizenship. In other words, these texts hold the potential to mediate our understanding of the political-economic and cultural dimensions of migration and the daily instantiations of violence occurring within and at the “gates” of both the U.S.-Mexico and Mexico-Guatemala borderlands in what we might refer to as the dialectic between empire and migration. Focusing on the material and ideological dimensions of the cultures of precarious life, displacement, exodus, resettlement, and border enforcement, my future research attempts to look at Chicana/o and Latina/o literary and filmic representations of immigration and migration through the theoretical perspectives of biopolitics, necropolitics, and exceptionality. This future research looks at the following literary and filmic texts in order to investigate the ways in which these texts substantiate and, in some cases, complicate these analytic perspectives: *The River Flows North* by Graciela Limón, *The Devil’s Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea, “The Cariboo Café” by Helen María Viramontes, and the motion picture *Babel* directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

In “The Managed Violence of the Borderlands: Treacherous Geographies, Policeability, and the Politics of Race,” Gilberto Rosas investigates the ways in which state and public forms of violence and dehumanizing rationalities pervading the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the U.S. southwest are directly linked to anti-immigrant

ideologies embedded in U.S. imperialism. In order to capture the daily instantiations of the managed violence of the borderlands, Rosas develops the concept of *policeability* to capture the complex and shifting permutations of managed violence like militarized border enforcement and surveillance, vigilantism, and informal forms of surveillance and discipline of immigrant daily life. Rosas' conceptualization of the managed violences of the borderlands draws from Michel Foucault's conceptualization of biopower and racism as a technology of power and governing. Political sovereignty exercised during conditions of peace, according to Rosas, constitutes what Foucault refers to as "silent wars" which are embodied in contemporary social institutions that "continuously reinstate relations of conquest" (403). Foucault posits such power operating both inside and outside the domain of the state. "In this respect," writes Rosas, "[Foucault's] concept of biopower refers to the modern political rationality that addresses populations as explicitly political problems. It is organized around two over-riding logics, those of 'making live' and 'letting die'" (403). The optimization of life and its concomitant subdivision of the population into the desirable and the undesirable, the legitimate and the illegitimate, establishes a caesura between the "Us/U.S." and "Them," between the "People" and the "Others."

While biopolitical strategies of population management link to contemporary culturalist racisms, we must carefully deploy Foucault's notions of biopower and racism such that it informs our analysis of the texts located in the socio-historical specificities of the late twentieth- and twenty-first century Mexico-US borderlands. In other words, we must carefully deploy Foucault's framework such that it retains the specific forms of biopower operating in the borderlands. Our investigation of the processes of racialization

and the targeting of migrant bodies along the borderlands requires that we attend to what is often referred to as the “negative” corollary to biopolitics—necropolitics. As the “negative” corollary to biopolitics, necropolitics constitutes a political technology inscribing negative political value to human life. Life devoid of political value derives from ideological constructions and the reification of racialized, gendered subjects perceived as being dangerous to the biological, cultural, or political well-being of the state. State authorities and agencies such as the U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. and Border Protection, the National Guard, local law enforcement agencies, and extra official actors like the Minuteman, the American Border Patrol, and the Civilian Homeland Defense constitute the more obvious permutations of the biopower/necropower order of power operating in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

The concept of “policeability,” then, attends to the more diffuse processes of population management captured in what Foucault refers to the “microphysics of power,” that is power distributed over a wide social spectrum operating between institutions and bodies themselves (Foucault, 26). Attending to this relational concept of power allows us to see, for example, how human bodies get transformed and, subsequently, transfigured into abstract labor power, one that requires a wide social system grounded in political, economic, juridical, and social institutions and practices. So, while we may be tempted to focus on state institutional policies and practices, we must also attend to the daily instantiations of power that operate in such places like Home Depot parking lots and shopping malls to community parks, neighborhood lawns, and affluent homes that effectively maintain political and economic disparities while effectively blurring the distinction between the documented and the undocumented, the citizen and the “alien.”

The power over life and death in the borderlands represents what some scholars refer to as a neo-colonial order.⁵³ The intensification of militarized border enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border and the neoliberal organized demand for transnational labor and capital circulation captures one of the more important dimensions of managed violences of the borderlands. This seeming paradox, according to Rosas, illustrates “the ongoing culmination of ideological processes that render commonsensical the use of military strategy, tactics, and technology for the policing and calculated, brutal, managements of such a population that the legacy of empire organizes” (413). This problematic and contentious organization is what many scholars in immigration studies and political geography refer to as the “security-trade nexus” of the U.S.-Mexico border. The contradictions between the exigencies of capital accumulation and capital flows *and* efforts to ratchet up national security and reproduce monolithic notions of national identity grate against each other exacerbating already existing racial and ethnic antagonisms across and within national borders. Within this contradiction between trade and security, commonsensical border enforcement practices, including the militarization of the border and public/individual forms of racial surveillance, render certain geographical spaces violently inhospitable. It is precisely this engagement with the transformation of “natural” spaces into politicized, treacherous border enforcement spaces with which these literary and filmic texts engage. In other words, these texts reconfigure the ways in which treacherous desert and mountain landscapes, typically

⁵³ For example, see *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States* (2006), Gilbert G. Gonzalez; *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migrations* (2003), Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez; *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2008), Alejandro Lugo; *NAFTA and Neo-colonialism: Comparative Criminal, Human, & Social Justice* (2004), Lawrence French and Magdaleno Manzanarez.

characterized as killing indiscriminately, are politically transformed into carefully engineered spaces of death and violence, which, as these texts make clear, kill in a very discriminate manner.

For example, *The Devil's Highway* imaginatively configures through the literary genre of narrative journalism what we have been referring to as the managed violences of the borderlands. In this graphically stunning narrative, *The Devil's Highway* painfully recounts in narrative form the difficult and deadly journey across the U.S. southwestern dessert land where dehydration, hyper- and hypothermia, hunger, and abusive smuggling and border enforcement practices accompany these border-crossers along the U.S.-Mexico border on their northward journey to the U.S. The horrific and inhumane conditions deriving from the logic of making live and letting die and the dehumanizing rationalities undergirding U.S. militarized border enforcement marks what has now become one the more notable literary representations of the “killing fields”:

Five men stumbled out of the mountain pass so sunstruck they didn't know their own names, couldn't remember where they'd come from, had forgotten how long they'd been lost . . . they were burnt nearly black, their lips huge and cracking . . . They were drunk from having their brains baked in a pan, they were seeing God and devils . . . They were beyond rational thought. Vision of home fluttered in their minds. (3)

What we can refer to here as a “death world” or “spaces of death” touches upon the necropolitical dimensions of U.S. border enforcement policy. And while this opening graphic scene takes readers immediately into the underworld of treacherous border crossings, it also highlights the corporeal dimensions of dehumanizing rationalities operating at the border. Deterrence, while not rendered illegal, yet made publically un- visible, operates through a necropolitical technology predicated on the potentiality of

violent, brutal death, or what Mbembe refers to as “the exposure to death.” My point here is that the channeling of migrant crossings along the U.S.-Mexico deserts and mountains as a direct result of post-NAFTA border enforcement policies like Operation Gatekeeper, Operation Hold the Line, etc., illustrates not only the contradiction between those rendered socially and politically disposable yet economically invaluable, but, in doing so, draws critical attention to the necropolitical dimensions or political rationalities of such policies.

Drawing from Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, the “camp” or “the structure in which the state of exception . . . is realized *normally*” emerges as the site of the neoliberal camp, a structure that is effectively rendered commonsensical or normal (emphasis original, 170). This seemingly descriptive yet graphic opening scene emerges as a provocative critique of the ultimate expression of sovereignty along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, that is the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who may die.

The legacy of U.S. expansionism at the borderlands is carefully crafted in this text insofar as the narrative skillfully links the legacy of U.S. militarism and history of conquest through the intensification of the militarized border. However, the relationship between past conquest and more recent border militarization is rendered intelligible through skillfully constructed images of an inhospitable desert setting through scenes of abandoned army tanks and air bombing ranges (U.S. Air Force’s Barry Goldwater bombing range in Arizona).⁵⁴ Note the following *conquista* scene: “When the white men came, they brought with them their mania for record keeping. They made their way

⁵⁴ For example, the U.S. invasion of Mexico, 1846-48, to the Pershing Expedition into Mexico, 1916-17, up to contemporary manifestations of U.S. American hegemony exercised through a vast system of military bases and political, economic, and cultural influence throughout the American hemisphere.

across the land, subduing indigenous tribes, civilizing the frontier. Missionaries brought the gentle world of the Lamb. Cavalrymen bravely tamed the badlands, built military outposts, settlements, ranches, and towns” (7). The passage carefully represents what many scholars working in Latin American and U.S American Studies point to as the “soft” mechanism or instruments of U.S. imperialism. Urrea continues,

Think of the border struggle as an extension of the Indian Wars, the cavalry now chasing new Apaches and Comanches. Much of the human hunting that goes on along the border happens on Cocpah, Papago, Pima, Apache, and Yaqui lands . . . Tohono O’Odham people, for example, regularly submit complaints of harassment by the Tucson [Border Patrol] sector. A truckload of Indians looks like a truckload of Mexicans to the cavalry. (39)

In historicizing contemporary border struggles within the long history of U.S. conquest of the southwest and Mexico’s northern border region, Urrea has effectively brought into focus the imperial logic undergirding contemporary neoliberal forms of border policing and enforcement.

Drawing again from Rosas, the term “exceptionality” refers to a diffused form of racial governance in which both state and informal/public mechanisms of racial governance inform militarized border enforcement, the naturalization of anti-immigrant paramilitary vigilantism, and everyday forms of surveillance upon the bodies of foreign nationals and racialized citizens at the borderlands. However, the inscription of exceptionality upon the bodies of immigrants and, in some cases, those resembling them, calls for a more nuanced approach that goes beyond a fixed, static notion of migrant settlement. The concept of the “plasticity of exceptionality” (339), therefore, offers a useful critical framework that captures the complexities of migratory flows and resettlement. As migrants travel across the exterior regions of Mexico and Central America to the

metropolitan areas in Mexico and throughout the U.S. southwest to both large cities and smaller towns along the Midwest and North East, so do their condition of exceptionality. Exceptionality, therefore, is not simply a site specific concept, but one that attends to the inscription of exceptionality upon the bodies of (im)migrants. Because the border cannot always be reduced to a fixed geographical location, the inscription of exceptionality upon immigrants working and residing in the U.S allows us to see how such figurative and elastic borders mark particular racialized bodies. In short, their illegal and/or racialized identity is marked by an ever present border, one that inscribes an exceptional state of being even in the most seemingly unexceptional places. Crossing the “killing deserts,” like the Devil’s highway across the Cabeza Prieta wilderness through the US Air Force’s Barry Goldwater bombing range, constitutes only one aspect or phase, albeit some of the most perilous, of the borderland condition. Given the mobility of exceptionality or the “plasticity of exceptionality,” many immigrants continue to face hostility and hazardous situations, even long after crossing the border and establishing work and residence within the United States.

In one of the most extraordinary fictional representations of the flexibility or plasticity of exceptionality, Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café” graphically illustrates how both the managed forms of violence and exceptionality converge in spaces geographically outside the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, in one scene from the story, the young female protagonist, Sonya, misplaces her keys to her apartment, keys which she considers her “guardian saint” amid the tensions and anxieties of the city. While watching her relative, Macky (perhaps her younger brother or cousin), Sonya decides to pay a visit to a trusted family friend, Mrs. Avila, in the hope of seeking temporary shelter until she finds her

keys. On the way to Mrs. Avila's house, the narrative drastically changes from one of humor and innocent naiveté to one of anxiety, confusion, and survival. In the following scene note how Sonya and Macky's world transforms into a treacherous and terrifying border-crossing.

They finally crossed the street at a cautious pace, the colors of the street lights brighter as darkness descended . . . Maybe she could ask Raoul's Popi where Mrs. Avila lived, but before she could think it all out, sirens flashed in their faces and she shielded her eyes to see the polie [the police] . . . The Polie are men in black who get kids and send them to Tijuana, says Popi. Whenever you see them, run, because they hate you. She grabs Macky by the sleeve and they crawl under a table of bargain cassettes . . . "Ssssh. Mi'jo, when I say run, you run, okay?" She waited for the tires to turn out, and as the black and white drove off she whispered "Now," and they scurried out from under the table and ran across the street, oblivious to the horns . . . Macky stumbled and she continued to drag him until his crying, his untied sneakers, and his raspy breathing finally forced her to stop . . . Her mouth was parched and she swallowed to rid herself of the metallic taste of fear. The shadows stalked them, hovering like nightmares. (67-68)

Viramontes' skilful description of these two young children's "escape" from "La Migra" disturbingly re-enacts what is arguably a treacherous border crossing scene. This skillfully crafted narrative imaginatively reconfigures the terror and anxieties of living under what we have been referring to as the plasticity of exceptionality. It is noteworthy to mention that the children's legal status is never established. The implication of this omission is extremely important as it gestures to the inextricable relation between border enforcement and anti-immigrant ideology. Moreover, it suggests that the rationalities supporting the apprehension, detention, and targeting of migrant bodies are underwritten by a semiotics of illegality.

Considering the ways in which life has a negative political and social value, necropolitics through various institutional apparatuses addresses life that is perceived as

dangerous with respect to the social order. Conceptualized as the negative referent to Foucault's biopolitics, that is, the fostering of life and optimization of population control, necropolitics becomes a useful analytic perspective in understanding the ways in which immigration policy and anti-immigrant ideology function as a form of political management through the capacity to dictate who must live and who may die. According to Mbembe, "That race (or for that matter *racism*) figures so prominently in the calculus of biopower is entirely justifiable . . . Operating on the basis of a split between the living and the dead, such a power defines itself in relation to a biological field" (17).

This death producing power, however, runs contrary to the labor supply and demand structure operating under neoliberal policies of trade between the U.S. and Mexico and global capital, in general. If indeed immigrant labor, especially unauthorized labor, is required to satisfy labor market demands and the exigencies of capitalist production and surplus, then it stands to reason that such labor must not be exterminated, but rather preserved. It is in this context that Rosas' contribution to this discussion proves valuable. He writes,

Foucault's conceptualization of racism is one of extermination or elimination that aims to purify the social body. This contrasts with a racism of *oppression* or *exploitation* that hierarchically partitions society . . . Racism is a far more subtle permutation of the state of exception that occurs in the mundane, daily evaluation of racialized, normative citizenship, as well as being subject to militarized forms of governance, where thousands of people are channeled into the "killing deserts". (emphasis added, 339)

The racism of oppression and exploitation, coupled with illegality, then, functions to produce and maintain flexible, docile labor while subjecting such labor to deplorable and inhumane living conditions. This process exhibits what I call an asymptotic effect,

whereby the dialectics of the production of death and the preservation of exploitable labor reproduce a necropolitical field of power along the borderlands.⁵⁵ The subtle permutations of immigrant exceptionality, then, capture both the most conspicuous and less obvious, informal forms of racial governance and necropower. It is in this context that I look at the film *Babel*.

Early in the movie, two adolescent Moroccan boys are seen herding livestock in a mountainous region. While watching the livestock and enduring what seems like hours of boredom and tedium, the boys decide to test the accuracy and range of their newly purchased rifle. As they take shots at the surrounding area from a mountaintop, they unintentionally hit a tour bus loaded with U.S. tourists. The bullet manages to find its way into the shoulder of a white, upper-middle class American woman (Kate Blanchette). Panic immediately ensues as the woman's husband (Brad Pitt) tends to her injury while the rest of the passengers scuffle away from the windows and scream at the bus driver to move the bus out of the perceived "terrorist" area. As the two children learn of this unfortunate mishap, they quickly flee the "scene of the crime" and race down the mountaintop away from any watchful eye in the area. Just as the children scurry down the mountaintop, the scene skillfully transitions into the very home of the two adults on board the bus.

In this scene, we encounter an upper-middle class San Diego suburban household. The children of the couple on board the bus in Morocco are in the care of Amelia, a caring and compassionate "undocumented" Mexican housekeeper. The construction of

⁵⁵ In mathematics, an asymptote is a line that a graph approaches, but does not intersect. While the line may always increasingly draw nearer to either the X- or Y-axis, it will never intersect and, therefore, extend infinitely.

spaces of criminality and terrorism constitutes one of the more important compositional elements of this film. The skilful segue from the Moroccan boys running down from the mountaintop to the Anglo-American children running around in their suburban “living room” in San Diego complicates normative conceptions of such spaces and as well as those of its occupants. The accidental shooting of an American tourist in Morocco and Amelia’s illegal presence in the U.S. both complicate normative conceptions of illegality and criminality. Later in the film, we learn that U.S. and Western governmental and media discourse frame the accident as a deliberate terrorist act, which initiates a region-wide manhunt for the “terrorists” responsible for the shooting. Sadly, the manhunt results in the tragic death of a Moroccan boy by local police enforcement agents acting under the false pretence of terrorism constructed by the U.S. State Department and U.S. and European mainstream media. However, what is especially important here is how the two boys’ accidental shooting gets framed into criminality much like Amelia’s illegal status eventually leads her to deportation to Tijuana (especially given that she has established permanent residency and work in the U.S. for over fifteen years). Moreover, both scenes point to how criminality gets constructed in what we may take to be spaces of everyday life. The San Diego suburban home and the Moroccan mountaintop signify spaces of criminality not because criminal activity occupy such spaces, but rather because the way in which these “actors” and their activity have been framed through fear, anxiety, and suspicion (of the “Other”) that construct and legitimize their criminality. In both cases, spaces of death and displacement mark the scenes of the crime, that is to say, a child is shot to death for his supposed terrorist activity and an unauthorized caretaker is deported and left on the streets of Tijuana on account of her unflinching care and love for

“her children,” especially as they attempt to make their way across the desert back to the U.S. as she saves the children by surrendering herself to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Throughout much of the film, the ways in which categories, labels, naming, and signifiers create trauma, violence, and misunderstanding symbolically demonstrate the potentially dangerous relationship between discourse (and its discursive liminalities) and death.

Ana Maria Manzananas Calvo’s examination of the intersections of security and economy at the US-Mexico border in her essay “Contested Passages: Migrants Crossing the Rio Grande and the Mediterranean Sea,” reveals the more unsettling aspects of neoliberalism’s defense of the politically and economically powerful. This intersection posits the notion that security is necessarily an economic issue. This constant state of insecurity and uncertainty generates and maintains an exceptional state of human existence where both exceptional means of survival and neoliberal strategies of containment and border enforcement under a state of exception violently clash. As Jane Juffers points out, “When the US-Mexico border becomes a *normalized* state of exception, the U.S. government finds it easier to expand the very contours of the border, again in the name of security” (emphasis added, 677). This state of exception or exceptionality of the borderland represents what Manzananas Calvo describes as a paradoxical double desire on part of the U.S.: “The desire for a sealed border that instills confidence in national definition and national identity is simultaneous to the desire for a cheap and submissive workforce” (761). On the transfiguration of *indocumentados* into criminals, or, more generally, labor into criminality, border crossing and the struggle for survival in the U.S. represent what Arturo Arias calls the “defilement of subjectivity.” This twofold transfiguration re-casts many labor-seeking migrants into dangerous and

delinquent bodies whereby their subjectivity confronts hostile processes of otherization resulting in the reification of the (im)migrant within the popular political imaginary. As Manzanas Calvo illustrates, “As the migrants cross the border they go through what Mary Pat Brady calls an ‘abjection machine’ that metamorphoses them into something else, into ‘aliens,’ ‘illegals,’ ‘wetbacks,’ . . . and renders them ‘unintelligible’ (and unintelligent), ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human” (765).

I would like to conclude by drawing from Arturo Aldama’s critique of the relationship between discourses of otherization emerging through the US-Mexico border condition and state-enforced acts of violence of the bodies of Mexicana/o and Latina/o immigrants and Chicanas/os in the United States. Drawing from Alfred Arteaga’s discussion of Chicano poetics of hybridization and dialogic poetics, Aldama notes the tension existing between monologic U.S. narratives of national and cultural unity and the dialogic, interlingual, hybridizing impulses of Chicana/o and Latina/o literary expressions that challenge and problematize such monologic impulses. However, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Mexican and Central American immigrants or émigrés crossing the Mexico-US border, Aldama proposes to add to the discussion the following propositions:

1. “The Border serves as ‘free zone’ for U.S. citizens and U.S. corporations.”
2. “Contrary to the free zone . . . the border is also a free zone of violence, a barrier to those trying to cross from the south.”
3. “Even though the border is selectively open to those whose class position confirms their [legal/licit] status, it forces a discourse of inferiorization on Mexicans and other Latinos.”

4. “Finally, once crossed, the border is infinitely elastic and can serve as a barrier and zone of violence for the Mexican or Latina/o who is confronted by racialist and gendered obstacles anywhere he or she goes in the US . . . this means that the immigrant continually faces crossing the border . . . a continual shifting from margin to margin.” (23)

I believe these four propositions will prove instructive with future research in understanding both the material and discursive forces behind the social formation of immigrant subjectivity, particularly as it informs an analysis of the ways in which Chicana/o and Latina/o cultural production chart the multiple vectors of liminality produced and maintained by the border. If in fact the elasticity of the border migrates with the “undocumented body,” then it would appear that the (im)migrant’s material and discursive status remains perpetually liminal (24). We should note, however, that a large number of authorized or legal (im)migrants from Mexico, Central and South America living in the U.S. do not experience the same kinds of exceptionality and liminality that most *undocumentados* experience. Clearly, class status, (dual) citizenship, race, and gender often determine to a large degree one’s ability to traverse the selectively porous borders across the Americas. In any case, attention to the production of such liminalities may prove useful when analyzing these primary texts by demonstrating the micro- and macropolitical dimensions of subject formation, i.e., how subjects get formed, positioned, and represented socially and discursively (25). Additionally, these texts provide dramatic representations of how anti-immigrant discourses and dehumanizing rationalities have “real” physical and psychological consequences. Analysis at the level of the body and personhood may allow us to better understand how the materialist practices of oppression and discursive practices of inferiority constitute the defilement or erasure of (im)migrant subjectivity.

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