

Woman Killing and Adoption in

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005)¹

Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová

Charles University, the Czech Republic.

Abstract

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) informs its readers about the serial feminicidal violence that has afflicted Ciudad Juárez, the twin town to El Paso, Texas. The novel is explicit about its feminist, political agenda and appeal to social justice. The article discusses details from the novel in which Gaspar de Alba portrays the Juárez murders in a compelling manner that employs Diana Russell's, and Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano's concepts of femi(ni)cide to provide a fictionalized, yet analytical, account of institutionalized gender violence targeting poor brown women. The article is innovative in its focus on *Desert Blood's* side characters, Cecilia and Elsa, who are key in Gaspar de Alba's ability to convey the complex structure of how feminicides come to be perpetuated through the utilization of women's bodies under capitalist and androcentric systems of social life. Concurrently, this article argues that a more careful and nuanced representation of intercountry adoption enhances *Desert Blood's* feminist and ethical appeal, and accounts in a greater detail for the dynamic of power relations between the Chicana protagonist and the two Mexican side characters of Cecilia and Elsa.

Keywords: Femicide, feminicide, Juárez, intercountry adoption, feminism, Chicana literature.

<https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v0i3.7550>

After decades of academic negotiations, critical research and numerous book-length studies on Chicana literature, it is safe to characterize Chicana writing as a productive and effective means of communicating Chicana identity politics and feminism. Indeed, Chicana writing, feminism and identity politics are mutually constitutive phenomena that form a paradigmatically consistent and cohesive representational universe, while maintaining genre and content heterogeneity, and honing theories and methods of addressing culturally constructed difference as a concept. Chicana literature, in general, exemplifies political instrumentalization of literary production that is (self)reflexive, strategic, political and explicit about its purpose. Through the situatedness of Chicana lived experience and by its connecting with the reality of the multilayered milieu of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Chicana authors produce counter-hegemonic discourses that resist intersectional discrimination and work not only towards their personal empowerment, but also towards social change and justice for all. It

¹ This publication was supported by The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports-Institutional Support for Long-term Development of Research Organizations—Charles University, Faculty of Humanities (2019).

is within this context of shared counter-hegemonic consciousness that Alicia Gaspar de Alba's award-winning novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) argues for transborder and transnational solidarity, and for vitally needed critical skepticism about the transborder and transnational movement of capital under neocolonial, capitalist practices.

One of the concluding arguments in Tey Diana Rebolledo's comprehensive analysis of Chicana letters, titled counter-intuitively *Women Singing in the Snow* (1995), underscores the conscious activist stance that triggers and drives Chicana literary outputs:

All Chicana writing is political because we are surrounded by politics, ideology, and gender inequities. What is remarkable is that Chicana writers, even the early ones, have been acutely aware of this and have grappled with it in many ways: they have dialogued, they have subverted, they have resisted, they have written in Spanish, they have invented and re-created. And always with the clear knowledge of what they were doing. (207-08)

Already on the opening pages and throughout the novel, Gaspar de Alba demonstrates her clear knowledge of what she is doing, while confronting the feminicidal² violence in Ciudad Juárez. In *Desert Blood*, both as a feminist and as an author, Gaspar de Alba proceeds in parallel to Rebolledo's claims. She comes into *dialogue* with academic research on women murders in Juárez and with the reactions of the victims' mothers to impunity; she *subverts* genre rules, reader expectations and the heteronormative imperative that underpins human interaction, as well as the notions of care and motherhood; she *resists* androcentric and capitalist views of social utilitarianism. Gaspar de Alba *writes* both in English and Spanish, for bilingualism and code-switching help generate a counter-discourse to the unfeeling holocaust—like the rationality of assembly lines, whose operations capitalize on the normativity of gender violence under androcentrism as the case of the Juárez murders testifies; she *invents* an iconic female protagonist to relate the horrors of capitalist, racist and misogynist subjugation of brown women workers; she *re-creates* the proverbial detective novel sleuth to expand the notions of silence and complicity, on the one hand, and notions of agency, on the other.

Gaspar de Alba's purpose could not be made more transparent. As she states in the disclaimer that appears on the very first pages of the novel, her intention in *Desert Blood* is to “expose the horrors of the [feminicidal] deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the English-speaking public ... [and to offer] some plausible explanation for the silence that has surrounded the murders” (vi). *Desert Blood*, thus, arises as a fictionalized account of what has,

² Unless I quote from secondary sources, throughout this article I prefer the adjective “feminicidal” to “femicidal,” and I also give preference to the concept of “feminicide” over “femicide”. I do so, as I explain further in the text, in order to draw on the analytical distinctions between femicide and feminicide as proposed by feminist research on woman killing. Ultimately, as I discuss further in the text, the concept of feminicide—originally introduced in its Spanish version as *feminicidio*—is an analytical tool tailored (also) for the Latin American context and allows for a comprehensive investigation of the social, economic, cultural and discursive context that shapes the background for woman killing. See Fregoso and Bejarano (2010).

over the past almost three decades, come to be referred to as the Juárez murders, a series of inexplicable woman killing with no end, no culprits, whose imprisonment would put an end to the chain of violence. It is a series of murders laden with diverse theories about the crimes, their impunity and their perpetuation.

Unlike existing literary criticism on *Desert Blood* that primarily compares the novel with other literary works on the issue of the Juárez murders, or focuses on its genre of mystery/detective novel and the lesbian protagonist's subversion of the established expectations of the sleuth character, or discusses the portrayal of physical torture by Gaspar de Alba,³ this article analyzes the significance of two side characters—Cecilia and Elsa—for the contextual representation of gender violence in the U.S.-Mexico border and the power relations pertaining to intercountry adoption. While I argue that *Desert Blood* is an accomplished, fictionalized feminist account of the Juárez murders, I also challenge the novel's adoption motif, as one that is lacking in its discussion of the relative inequality between the Mexican-American adoptive parent and the Mexican biological mother(s).

Poor Juárez, So Far from God, So Close to the United States

Since the mid-1990s, when an example of massive, globalizing processes came to fruition through the negotiations over a shared, economic space among Mexico, Canada and the United States and by the signing of NAFTA—the North American Free Trade Agreement—, Ciudad Juárez saw an increasing number of extremely brutal murders of women. While Juárez had long been infamous for elevated standards of criminality, loosened law enforcement, drugs and sex-related crimes and clandestine economy, all of which benefited from the proximity of the United States,⁴ both the high number of the dead women and the extreme nature of their demise stood out and shocked the city and the world.

Originally from El Paso, Texas, Gaspar de Alba is perfectly cognizant of the U.S.-Mexico border's presence in the cultural, economic and social interaction that inform the reality of the borderlands, in general, and the dynamics of El Paso/Ciudad Juárez, in particular. Through the historical notion of an expanding Western frontier that serves as a representation of social and cultural progress aided by colonialism and capitalism, the U.S.-Mexico border engenders a myth of American exceptionalism and nation-building, and is paradigmatic for an American identity formation. Simultaneously, the border has long been viewed as a security threat. Being both "barrier and bridge" (Ackleson 166), the border is a place associated with transnational flows of goods, migrants, narcotics and, as Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona remind us, violence (2). Gaspar de Alba's novel arises from the latter association: the border in the Chihuahuan desert, spanning the region of the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez twin cities, bears witness to horrific acts of gender violence and localizes the novel plot on both sides of the Río Grande. By doing so, she motions towards transborder solidarity and the acknowledgement of the Chicana complex identity that, historically, straddles the U.S.-Mexico border. Further, since

³ For more on the listed topics, see Mata (2010), López-Lozano (2010) and Messmer (2012).

⁴ For more on this, see Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010).

she identifies as a queer, feminist scholar, in speaking out for the feminicidal victims, she creates literary and scholarly alliances in order to, in Anzaldúan terms, bridge the gap between the First and Third World, between minorities on both sides of the border. Most vitally, she creates a feminist platform for voicing women's fates that have been silenced.

Gaspar de Alba does so in correspondence with feminist theories on the importance of positionality, situated knowledges and the significance of lived experience that bears on one's critical perspectives.⁵ The writer punctuates both her novel and research interests in Chicana literature and art with details pertaining to her auto/biography. Therefore, the stimuli prompting her to pen *Desert Blood* are equally personal and autobiographical, as well as activist, political and scholarly. She spells out on multiple occasions the exasperation about her original ignorance and lack of awareness of the woman killings in the vicinity of the cities to which she claims affinity. Her frustration arises both from the fact that, "El Paso is [her] hometown and that [she has] family living on both sides of the Córdoba Bridge [where] yet nobody really [knew] anything" (*[Un]Framing* 177), and from her failing to recognize the feminicidal epidemic as a feminist and activist scholar, when the epidemic was already underway. Indeed, by the time Gaspar de Alba learned about the murders of poor, brown women in Juárez in June 1998, the body count had reached 137 fatalities and the violence wave had been in progress, most likely, for five or so years (*[Un]Framing* 177).

Conceptualizing Femicide

Research shows, and Gaspar de Alba employs its findings in the novel, that the vast majority of the victims, whose lacerated bodies have been found decomposing close to Juárez and its vast maquiladora industrial complexes, have a lot in common.⁶ Frequently, the women were not originally from Juárez, but had migrated north from within Mexico; they were rarely older than twenty-five years of age; they were precarious employees of the local assembly lines, or worked in bars and restaurants elsewhere in Juárez; they were slim, petite and brown-skinned. Moreover, what they shared was their abhorrent form of death. The evidence communicated by the bodies recovered made it manifest that the women's murders were related to their gender identity; specifically, women's sexual and reproductive organs were targeted in the course of the violent acts.⁷

In other words, the primary focus of the perpetrator(s) was sexualized, physical torture and dehumanizing disposal of the cadaver in the Chihuahuan desert and in abandoned, dilapidated

⁵ See Lorenz-Meyer (2005) and Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) for discussions on positionality and the politics of location. Also, see Harraway (1988) for her notion of situated knowledges, and Scott (1991) for her analysis of the feminist concept of experience.

⁶ For more data about the victims of the Juárez feminicides, refer to Wright (2006), Schmidt Camacho (2005), Staudt (2008), Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010), and Schatz (2017).

⁷ For more details on the mutilation of women's bodies in Juárez, see Wright (1999) and (2006), and Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010).

lots on the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez. Body count estimates vary depending on the source,⁸ yet the generally accepted number points out that from 1993 to 2013 more than 800 women faced their cruel death in Juárez through what Diana Russell calls femicide, while Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano refer to it as feminicide.⁹ All the authors pay attention both to the modes in which women get killed as well as to the socio-cultural contexts in which the killings take place. The concept of femi(ni)cide is then deployed as an analytical category. While bearing in mind that there are actual individuals accountable for the murders being studied by means of femi(ni)cide, the concept(s) allow(s) for the interpretation of the criminal acts as the effects of the failure of the state, and its legal and social institutions, to stop the murder epidemic, to protect women's rights and to "imagine a female life free of violence" (Schmidt Camacho 267). Thus, such killings as the ones at hand in Juárez are more than incidental, personal attacks.

According to Julia Monárrez Fragoso, femicide is deeply rooted in the androcentric, social order which "predisposes, to a greater or lesser degree, that women be murdered." As Monárrez Fragoso argues, a woman's mere gender identity may constitute sufficient reason for her to be killed. Conversely, a woman's not-being-a-woman "adequately" substantiates femicide as well (Monárrez Fragoso). While Monárrez Fragoso's argument points to the social policing of femininity and its acceptable, sanctioned performativity, Russell, who coined the concept in 1970s, defines femicide as "a killing of females by males *because they are female*" (Russell and Harnes 3). Russell claims that the established terms, such as manslaughter,¹⁰ homicide or murder, cloud the power relations and mechanisms of power reproduction within a patriarchal society, where women and men do not enjoy equal access to freedoms, rights and all forms of power.¹¹ The distinction that femicide accomplishes as a concept does not lie in violence per se—both men and women experience violence while under attack. The distinction reveals that during an assault, women live through a form of submission to masculine violence, which, in regards to the patriarchal organization of society, marks and targets women's being in the world in ways that may not, or do not, correspond to men's experience.

⁸ See footnote 1 in Mata's "Writing on the Walls: Deciphering Violence and Institutionalization in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*", or Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán's *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. The essays contained in Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán's anthology give different estimates of the number of victims. As the editors explain, "There has been no systematic accounting of the victims or accountability by the authorities, which results in only more confusion, more impunity for [the] perpetrators, and less chance of resolution" (10). Various authors, however, agree that the official statistics are much lower than the real count.

⁹ For detailed discussions of the concept of femicide and feminicide, respectively, refer to Radford and Russell (1992), Russell (2001), and Fregoso and Bejarano (2010).

¹⁰ While the English language uses the generic "man" to signify both women and men in respect to the argument made by Russell, i.e. the cases when women are purposefully killed because they are women, the legal term "manslaughter" semantically effaces the gender identity of a female victim. In other words, a woman's gender identity is the grounds upon which her killing is established, and therefore plays a vital role in her death. The term "womanslaughter" is not used as it is subsumed under the generic "manslaughter."

¹¹ Russell discusses at length how her definition of femicide developed over time in her speech given at the United Nations Symposium on Femicide held on 26 November, 2012.

Fregoso and Bejarano's notion of feminicide (in Spanish *feminicidio*) draws on all of the above. Nevertheless, feminicide expands the concept in order to suit the Spanish-speaking milieu of Latin American realities and to assess the contextual factors contributing to the killings of women:

[U]nlike most cases of women's murders, men are not killed because they are men or as a result of their vulnerability as members of a subordinate gender; nor are men subjected to gender-specific forms of degradation and violation, such as rape, sexual torture, prior to their murder. Such gender differences in the experience of violence suggest the need for an alternative analytic concept, such as feminicide, for mapping the hierarchies embedded in gender-based violence. (Fregoso and Bejarano 7)

In addition, the authors insert the long-standing patriarchal binary of the private and public spheres—widely discussed and challenged by various strands of feminism—into the analytical category of feminicide. Feminicide, in this respect, is a crime against humanity that helps explicate gender-based violence that is both “public and private, implicating both the state (directly and indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or state actors); it thus encompasses systematic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal violence” (Fregoso and Bejarano 5). At the same time, the authors view feminicide as an effect of intersectional inequality, pertaining to one's racial, cultural and class identity, as well as to one's social and economic status. Judging from what is known about the Juárez victims and their deaths, it is safe to claim that we deal with a representative case of feminicide in the actual reality of the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as in Gaspar de Alba's novel *Desert Blood*.

Femicides in *Desert Blood*

Being both a feminist writer and a Chicana/o Studies professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, Gaspar de Alba puts her research skills, critical judgment and social awareness into practice when conjuring the fictionalized account of Juárez's horrific presence. The author's writing makes it apparent that—by implicitly drawing on Fregoso and Bejarano's coinage of feminicide—the Juárez murders by no means exist in a social, economic and cultural vacuum. Rather, they are portrayed as an extreme symptom of hierarchical power relations, representative of capitalist, androcentric and racist corporate culture, and neocolonial bargain.

Inspired by a brainstorming list, resulting from Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán's research in *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera* (2010), Marietta Messmer sums up the theories advanced so far to investigate who is responsible for the femicides and why they occur in Juárez. According to Messmer,

[the theories range] from identification of one or more killers, local gangs ..., drug cartels, bus drivers ..., or corrupt policemen, via the involvement of high government

officials, federal agents, wealthy U.S. killers, well-protected sons of rich Mexican families, organ harvesters, satanic cults, or producers of snuff videos, to, most infamously, the victims themselves who were either accused of leading double lives as prostitutes or simply dressing too provocatively.

With no actual facts yielded by governmental investigations that would redeem the global public's anxiety, and most importantly atone for the loss suffered by the families of slain victims with providing an answer to "Who is killing 'Las hijas de Juárez?'" (Gaspar de Alba, *Making a Killing* 66), *Desert Blood* eventually employs all the above implications in order to emphasize the transnational dimensions of the gendered crimes. Most significantly, the novel highlights the systemic involvement of both U.S. and Mexican officials and institutions. On the one hand, there is, for instance, the U.S. Border Patrol's Captain Jeremy Wilcox, Chief Detention Enforcement Officer, who is simultaneously a producer of snuff films, or the finding that "El Paso is the largest dumping ground of sex offenders in the country" (*Desert* 234). On the other hand, there is the intentional destruction of evidence because of the Mexican police's burning of victims' clothes (*Desert* 45, 308). Claudia Sadowski-Smith points out that Gaspar de Alba "[takes] liberties with chronologies, events, and characters, adding metaphorical details to emphasize [the novel's] theory of the identity of femicide perpetrators" or rather—I would add—the perpetrators' misogynist and capitalist motivations for committing the murders (82).

Gaspar de Alba introduces Juárez as El Paso's historical double—a sin city where sex and narcotics are readily available. The seedy bars of the red light district eventually yield pieces of information and help build *Desert Blood's* backdrop narrative of the troubled, denationalized zone with broken infrastructure and failing institutions. These bars are characteristic of Juárez, a city which, according to Alicia Schmidt Camacho, notoriously caters to U.S. soldiers, international tourists and working-class migrants with leisure, drugs and women's sexual labor (265). The identity and layout of Ciudad Juárez were radically altered when, starting in the 1960s, the Mexican government, faced with recurring economic struggles, gradually turned Ciudad Juárez into Mexico's largest maquiladora complex.¹² Melissa Wright argues in her early study, as well as in her later work, on the disposability of Juárez maquiladoras' female employees that the industry relies on while marketing the Mexican female worker as one "whose value can be extracted from her, whether it be in the form of her virtue, her organs, or her efficiency on the production floor" ("Dialectics" 472).

Gaspar de Alba pays heed to the objectifying and exploitative discourses Wright alerts us to. For example, the writer uses the imagery of spent pennies to communicate within the neoliberal and androcentric context, the workers' worthlessness, on the one hand, and the commodification of their bodies, on the other. In addition, *Desert Blood's* side characters, Cecilia and Elsa, two maquiladora employees, are key in Gaspar de Alba's ability to convey the complex structure of how feminicides, in Fregoso and Bejarano's terms, come to existence and

¹² For more on the industrial development in Juárez, see Nash (2005), Livingston (2004) and Wright (2011).

come to be perpetuated through poverty, stigmatization and misogyny. Both workers embody the maquiladora complex's utilization of women, where their bodies "fluctuat[e] between value and waste" (Wright, *Disposable* 88): Elsa and Cecilia engender the systematic and systemic exploitation practices that capitalism and androcentrism apply to women's productive and reproductive bodies. Unlike the novel's multilayered chief protagonist, Ivon Villa, whose resolute actions almost overbearingly force other characters (and I would claim scholars, too) to gravitate towards her, Cecilia and Elsa are barely the main focus of existing literary critiques and analyses of *Desert Blood*. Although present interpretations of the novel cannot omit both characters' roles in the plot as successive parents of Ivon's child-to-be-adopted, my specific perspective elaborated below aims to show how Cecilia and Elsa expose Gaspar de Alba's compelling feminist writing, on the one hand, and disputable feminist writing, on the other.

Elsa's and Cecilia's Capitalist Efficiency and Patriarchal Virtue

The two characters that trigger the main protagonist's, Ivon Villa, interest in the Juárez feminicides and influence her difficult decision to adopt their children, are the young maquila workers: Cecilia and Elsa. Ivon's interest booms rapidly as her sister, Irene, gets kidnapped in Juárez, the motif of which informs the main detective narrative of *Desert Blood*. Prior to their death, Cecilia and Elsa embody the capitalist and patriarchal exploitation of female worker capacities. While Cecilia's death initially opens Ivon's eyes to the brutality on the border, Elsa's passing is only implied in the novel. Both women are worked to exhaustion, but they also suffer in the poverty of shantytowns that lack basic infrastructure. Their bodies are exploited for work, yet the labor their brown bodies yield does not provide for dignified existence, economic self-sufficiency or access to proper healthcare. Labor does not lift Cecilia or Elsa from poverty, rather it reinforces the capitalist, for-profit utilization of marginalized workers' lives. Through the illustration of Cecilia's and Elsa's material indigence, Gaspar de Alba poignantly criticizes the disparities in income and the limitations capitalist work represents for oppressed and marginalized individuals.

Even when employed, disenfranchised workers are faced with some harsh choices: pregnant Cecilia wears a girdle to conceal her pregnancy as it could cause her being fired, for the factory would be forced to pay her maternity leave. The novel implies that she suffers from a medical condition that "makes the baby ride too low," therefore she is under medical supervision in the factory, where a nurse tells Cecilia her pregnant belly is nothing more than "a bag of water and bones" (*Desert* 11). Simply put, Cecilia hides her pregnancy from doctors working for the maquila, but simultaneously gets checked by them. Although a superficial reading of the novel might suggest that this paradox poses an unresolved contradiction in the story, with regard to the author's critical view of the corporate institutions entangled in the feminicides' continuation, it needs to be recognized that health care in the novel is not to facilitate curing and healing, but to exert control over women's bodies and to ascertain the smooth operation of

the manufacturing cycle.¹³ When attempting to make sense of the complexities related to maquila women's femininity and the murder cases, Ivon, a visiting professor in Women's Studies at a college in Los Angeles, makes an informed observation about the mutual interconnectedness of capitalism and patriarchal roles ascribed to women. Ivon says, "Although we love having all that surplus labor to exploit, once it becomes reproductive rather than productive, it stops being profitable. How do we continue to make a profit from these women's bodies and also curtail the threat of their reproductive power?" (*Desert* 332). Thus, Wright's notions of the performance on the production floor and feminine virtue cited above are openly discussed in *Desert Blood's* ideological resistance to androcentric and capitalist depletion of women's bodies (and not only in Juárez).

Cecilia's and Elsa's virtue emerging from the promise of their motherhood—traditionally deemed as the paramount goal for women under patriarchy—ultimately subjects both of them to medical examinations of their reproductive systems and, respectively, to experiments with new methods of fertility control. Through a conversation, Ivon learns that Elsa's son is the product of a failed contraception test. During a gynecological screening at her maquila, Elsa was artificially inseminated so that contraceptives being developed in the local laboratory could be tested for efficiency. Stunned, later in the novel, Ivon ponders the circumstances of Cecilia's, Elsa's and other maquiladora workers' lives, sicknesses and deaths, and mulls over: "[The] tragedy of their lives did not begin when their desecrated bodies were found in a deserted lot. The tragedy began as soon as they got jobs in the maquiladoras. As soon as they had to take a pregnancy test with their application, as soon as they had to show their first soiled sanitary napkin to prove they were menstruating" (*Desert* 331). Thus, by the time Cecilia's and Elsa's original efficiency at the assembly line is jeopardized by their motherhood, their bodies have already been successfully mined out by both the industrial complex and the patriarchal imperative of proper femininity. Drawing on Wright again, in that instance, Cecilia and Elsa become "disposable" as workers (*Disposable* 39). Pregnant Cecilia, who in the beginning of the novel is about to start caring for a child shortly, and terminally sick Elsa, who is currently raising a child, used to be assets, but now they are of no value for the capitalist labor market. Their value has diminished because of pregnancy and motherhood. Within the capitalist realm, they have gone from "value to waste" (Wright, *Disposable* 88). Yet, Cecilia's and Elsa's virtue, which arises from them having accomplished the androcentric normative of maternity, remains unscathed. In the upshot, these literary characters' bodies and their organs have been used for both production and for reproduction. But, if they have been disposed of as employees, can they possibly become disposable as mothers?

The context within which the novel paints Cecilia's sexualized murder and the entire network of feminicidal violence perpetuation, as well as Elsa's tragic life in the shadow of the maquiladora industry, indeed make *Desert Blood* a superior example of a flawlessly developed piece of writing, whose qualities are displayed through the minute details the author relates

¹³ For more on the issue of workers' health and maquiladora operations, see Wright (2006) or Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010).

based on her comprehensive knowledge of the Juárez feminicides and relevant research. In fact, in the conclusion, the novel makes it explicit that the horrors are an effect of structural and institutional neglect and/or complicity. When musing on the complexities of the Juárez women's murders she witnessed in the course of investigating her sister's abduction, Ivon knows it will be difficult to dismantle the system that enables the existence of violence:

Is it just a coincidence that there are over 600 registered sex offenders being given one-way tickets to El Paso, and that nameless, faceless killers are decimating and desecrating the bodies of all these poor brown women in Juárez? ... Pornographers, gang members, serial killers, corrupt policemen, foreign nationals with a taste for hurting women, immigration officers protecting the homeland—what did it matter who killed them? This wasn't a case of "whodunit," but rather of who was allowing these crimes to happen? Whose interests were being served? Who was covering it up? Who was profiting from the deaths of all these women? (*Desert* 333)

Gaspar de Alba's fictionalized portrayal of the suffocating context of androcentric bias, neoliberal politics of labor, lacking infrastructure, and failing and/or corrupt law enforcement and state institutions facilitate one's understanding of how gender violence is bred and, in its uttermost consequences, manifested in feminicide. In this respect, *Desert Blood* is an example of compelling feminist writing.

Child Adoption and the (Feminist) Limits of Becoming a Parent

The intersection of Ivon's life with Cecilia's pregnancy and later Elsa's parenting, however, gravely complicates the compelling feminist message of transborder solidarity. The novel's call for social justice, so comprehensively communicated in the representations of systemic feminicide, is undermined in the way the book relates the adoption motif. Cecilia's agreement to give up her soon-to-be-born baby for adoption because of poverty, propels Ivon to travel to El Paso for the first time in two years. After Cecilia's sudden death through torture, rape and murder, when she is stabbed and the fetus is extracted from her body, it is Elsa who replaces Cecilia. Fatally ill with ovarian cancer that is most likely caused by the illegal contraceptives tests carried out by the maquiladora medical staff, Elsa agrees to give her malnourished son, Jorgito, to Ivon for adoption. While the arch of the narrative of Ivon's original motivation for coming to the U.S. border town reaches completion, still it is difficult not to challenge Ivon's relationship to both the two women and their children. In fact, the issue of the adoption in the novel is contentious with regards to the explicit feminist positionality of Ivon Villa as a lesbian Women's Studies scholar, in particular, and the explicit anti-misogynist and anti-capitalist politics of *Desert Blood*, in general.

From the opening lines to its epilogue, the novel makes a convincing case against the stark commodification and objectification of women's bodies in Juárez. As already discussed, Wright notes that in the real-life maquiladora narrative, the Mexican woman is coded in the model of

variable capital as a woman “whose worth fluctuates from a status of value to one of waste” (*Disposable* 72). Analogously, the workers’ disposability in the labor market is directly linked with their worth as human beings, a symptomatic consequence of neoliberal and neocolonial perception of humans as individuals severed from their determining circumstances and contexts, pursuing and providing profit and quenching personal interests. Ultimately, *Desert Blood* mourns the lives and life stories lost through feminicides and exploitation as it exposes the hierarchical systems that rank human worth, pointing out in Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Corona’s words that in Juárez, “the fluctuating booms and downturns of the global, regional, formal, and underground economies and markets have a direct impact on such fundamental issues as the preservation and reproduction of human life” (2). Cecilia’s and Elsa’s options for reproduction of life go unquestioned in *Desert Blood*: Cecilia has already conceived and should go into labor soon, and Elsa’s son is three years old. However, it is the preservation of life that channels them to make the decision about seeking adoption for their children. They are both struggling economically and medically, and will be unable to care properly for their offspring in the near future, the novel tells us. A key factor in reading the scenes leading to Ivon’s eventual adoption of Elsa’s son lies in recognizing that the novel disguises who has initiated the negotiations for the adoption.

While the novel allows space for explaining Ivon’s intention to become a mother through adopting, it ignores Cecilia’s or Elsa’s views of giving up their children. In her memory, Ivon repeatedly returns to an encounter she had in a bookstore, where a child pleaded with his dad not to leave him alone: “I thought you were gonna supervise me in the kid’s section, I am starting to feel kinda lonely” (*Desert* 18). The air of loneliness in the boy’s replica makes Ivon resolve her dilemma. After some introspection and drawing from her original refusal to raise a child, Ivon resolves her internal struggle and joins her partner, Brigit, in wanting to adopt. She reaches out to her cousin, Ximena, a social worker tending to orphans and poor, marginalized families in Juárez, and flies to the border to retrieve Cecilia’s baby. Cecilia’s death opens the novel, yet the connection between her and Ivon is only made in retrospect. Both biological and adoptive mothers-to-be never get to speak to each other. Ivon, however, is able to attend the autopsy performed on Cecilia’s dead body. Thus, Cecilia is multiply silenced; her mouth is gagged, she dies, and the only ideas and feelings the novel affords her pertain to her and her child’s very murders. The following is what the readers learn about the fatal event:

The drug they had given her made her feel like she was under water. She could not feel the blades slicing into her belly. She saw blood splashing, heard a tearing sound, like the time she’s had a tooth pulled out at the dentist’s office, something torn out by the roots, deeper than the drug. Felt a current of night air deep inside her, belly hanging open. She tried to scream, but someone hit her on the mouth again, and someone else stabbed into the bag of water and bones. (*Desert* 1-2)

The only details of some depth we learn about Cecilia's life are, ironically, her life's very final moments seen from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. Marjorie Agosin's fitting poem, which Gaspar de Alba quotes in her critical introduction on feminicides in *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* (2010), acutely sums up the paradox: "All we know about [her] / is [her] death" (4). Furthermore, Cecilia's perspectives, either on adoption or her very own demise, remain unknown, they are silenced. Parallel to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) argument on the inability of the subaltern to speak for themselves as there is no available discourse within which their concerns could be voiced (305-06), the novel does not afford Cecilia a platform to speak from; she lacks voice and has to be represented. Thus, the readers never learn what Cecilia thought of giving up her baby for adoption, and Ximena stands as the only representative to speak for Cecilia on the issue.

Unlike Cecilia, Elsa—because of the mere fact that she is still alive—provides more space and can be more inquisitive about her son's, Jorgito, possible future. Also, she is able to share the details of her son's origin, revealing, thereby, the monstrous structure of corporate-backed, gender-based violence targeting assembly-line female employees: Jorgito is genetically the son of an Egyptian maquiladora gynecologist. Still, poverty and terminal illness are, besides Jorgito's abusive grandmother, the decisive factors *Desert Blood* cites as the explanations for why adoption is being considered. Yet again, we never find out whether Elsa sought adoption on her own volition or whether—or rather to what extent—Ximena, with her social worker expertise and ties to American families willing to adopt children from the so-called Third World, was instrumental in her decision making.

Moreover, what makes the adoption scenes in *Desert Blood* controversial are both the casualness and speed with which Ximena is able to procure Jorgito for adoption within the days following Cecilia's and her baby's deaths. Following Chandra Talpade Mohanty's argument about ethnocentric, methodologically flawed, and decontextualized social and cultural representations of the so-called Third World women in Western feminist research which—possibly unintentionally, yet effectively—victimizes and passivizes marginalized women of color, the expedited replaceability of Cecilia's baby with Elsa's son speaks volumes about *Desert Blood's* stereotypical portrayal of the feminization of poverty and mothering in the Global South. In different—more radical—words, Cecilia and Elsa, having been exploited in the capitalist production of goods on the assembly line, are now exploited by the international adoption market as mothers whose unique individualities are erased and substituted with their reproductive capacities.

Mohanty's seminal text warns against Western feminist researchers' insinuation that disadvantaged "Third World" women lack agency, power, knowledge and the means to rise above their poor conditions and oppression. Most significantly, she warns against the reification of discourses of power that portray such women as being in constant need of Western assistance, supply of knowledge and guidance; rather, she emphasizes the importance of nuanced contextualization, exploring one's tacit expectations and acknowledging one's blind spots and relative power position, potentially leading to unintended consequences of erroneous,

discursive representation (333-36). Since *Desert Blood* stems from a political, feminist agenda, it is unusual that the book's omniscient narrator does not take a critical stance to Ivon's consent to dubitable adoption practices that involve bribery and essentially turn the child into purchasable goods at the shady market of intercountry adoption. My critical reading of the adoption scene suggests that Ivon's very blind spots and resulting reproduction of power that Mohanty cautions against are revealed through Ivon's and Ximena's uncritical and unreflected approach to Elsa and Cecilia as poor Mexican women. Ivon's and Ximena's awareness of Cecilia's and Elsa's marginalized positions in Juárez does not exempt the two Chicanas and U.S. citizens from holding Western "othering" views of Mexican females, despite the fact that they themselves face racial and sexual discrimination on the American soil. Granted, Ivon does reflect on the potential, financial security derived from her tenure-track position in the academia when she ponders parenthood, but she is unable to apply this power structure when considering intercountry adoption. Possibly, it is convenient for the plot to leave Ximena's talks with the biological mothers about adoption beyond the scope of the narrative. This, in effect, silences the biological mothers, whose views come not to matter in the adoption narrative. *Desert Blood*, ultimately, focuses on the adoptive mother, Ivon, not on the mother giving up her child. It is precisely this moment in the novel that is, according to Laura Briggs, a representative aspect of intercountry adoption discourse in general ("Making" 347-48).

My resistant reading of the adoption scene is inspired by Briggs's work. While the feminist historian of reproductive politics does not explicitly allude to Mohanty, her recognition that Western discourses on international adoption arise from unequal and ethnocentric power relations is valid. One of the tasks of Briggs's research is to decenter the focus of adoption discourse on adoptive parents and shed light on the experience of parents who, for various reasons, give up their children. *Desert Blood's* perspective, however, dwells on Ivon and her negotiation of becoming a parent, and on the seemingly inexhaustible supply of Mexican children up for grabs. Relating the complexities of international adoption, Briggs argues:

Adoption may sometimes be the best outcome in a bad situation, but it is always layered with pain, coercion, and lack of access to necessary resources, with relatives (usually single mothers) who are vulnerable. Stranger adoption is a national and international system whereby the children of impoverished or otherwise disenfranchised mothers are transferred to middle-class, wealthy mothers (and fathers). The relative power of these two groups, and the fact that stranger adoption almost never takes place in the opposite direction, sets the inescapable framework in which adoption is inserted. (*Somebody's* 4-5).

Drawing on another feminist scholar, Rickie Solinger, Briggs elaborates that the discourse inherently driving U.S. intercountry adoption is that of a "child rescue mission," under whose influence it is possible to "define the situation [surrounding a particular adoption] in ways that insist that the biological mother doesn't really count" ("Making" 348). Earlier in this paper, and

drawing on Wright's notion of disposable women as employees, I posed a question about whether Elsa and Cecilia could also be read as disposable mothers after they have been disposed of by the assembly industry. Solinger's quote, I dare say, answers the query.

To elaborate on my argument on the biological mothers' disposability, let us consider the following details from Gaspar de Alba's novel. Through directions given to Ivon about whom to pay and how much to pay during the adoption process, Ximena makes it clear that Cecilia's and Elsa's children are just another set of kids within a larger group of Mexicans, whose adoption into the comfort of U.S. middle-class families she has helped to arrange. She knows the police might need to be bribed, the nurse at the hospital is paid for filling out fake paperwork, and her assistant priest, Father Francis, is sponsored for providing patronage and bringing peace to the families passing the children onto adoptive parents (*Desert* 16). While Ivon comments on the situation, "[sounding] like so sleazy," Ximena essentializes the U.S.-Mexico region saying: "Welcome to the real world of the border" (*Desert* 16). The indication of the possible illegality of Ximena's undertaking is voiced by Brigit, but Ivon's response parallels Ximena's: "Why wouldn't it be [legal]? Ximena's a social worker, that's what she does. ... Women are always giving up babies in Juárez" (*Desert* 20). As implied above, it is this unreflected essentialism of the border as an almost lawless zone, Ximena's social network and unchallenged local-smarts, as well as the novel's rendering of adoption as inherently a positive notion, that warrant a more nuanced reading of Ivon's road to parenthood vis-à-vis the Juárez feminicides.

After Cecilia's death, Ivon almost aborts her plan to adopt. However, Ximena argues for continuing the adoption process. She insists that adopting a child from Juárez equals saving life. If Jorgito is not rescued from his precarious situation, his future, according to Ximena, will consist of "begging on the bridge, getting rounded up by some child prostitution ring or running drugs back and forth across the border" (*Desert* 82). *Desert Blood's* portrayal of Ximena's assertion implicitly touches upon discourses of imperialism and capitalist objectification, on the one hand, and the myth of a messianic archetype, on the other. In the same vein, Irene Mata makes a note of the ideological figure of the "savior from the North that reinforces the racist portrayal of the Mexican people as inept," and in constant need of rescue and guardianship by Americans (16). This stereotype, traditionally linked to a white savior figure, is challenged by Gaspar de Alba through Ivon's being a brown woman. Still, the protagonist's feminist ethics makes her want to somehow help rectify the situation in Juárez, at least for some women and their children, such as Elsa and Jorgito. While offering assistance is certainly appropriate, my point of contention lies in Ivon's limited feminist (self)reflection regarding the position of relative power she inhabits as opposed to Elsa. To phrase it differently, by adopting Jorgito, Ivon assuredly improves his life chances arising from her comparatively secure employment and life in the U.S. The financial amount provided to Jorgito's mother for adoption may transiently aid Elsa during her disease's terminal stage. But it never occurs to Ivon, who is throughout the novel portrayed both as an avid feminist activist and a highly rational, thoughtful and ruminative individual with manifest analytical and detective skills, to ponder

whether her helping Jorgito and Elsa is not a mere means in her attempt at helping herself become a parent. I suggest that a more differentiated, power-conscious justification of the adoption scene would have underscored the novel's overall feminist, ethical message and appeal to social justice. Because all strands of feminism emphasize the necessity to analyze power disparities and intersectionality, and since Gaspar de Alba's novel is a conscious, outright political mission, cognizant of the context it aims to critique, Sadowski-Smith is correct with regards to the adoption motif when she claims that, "*Desert Blood* fails to address the unequal power relations among poor Mexican and well-to-do Mexican-American women, like Ivon, that enable the exchange of children for money—their commodification—in the first place" (85). It is this part of *Desert Blood* that, in my reading, exemplifies disputable feminist writing.

Conclusion

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's writing makes painfully clear that the Juárez feminicides, both in reality and in the fictionalized world of the novel, by no means exist in a social, economic and cultural vacuum. Rather, they are portrayed as an extreme symptom of hierarchical power relations representative of capitalist, androcentric and racist corporate culture, and neocolonial bargain. Analogously, nor does *Desert Blood* itself subsist in isolation. On the one hand, the novel is a product of the author's long and critical research—initially advanced by Gaspar de Alba's niece, Lizeth, who in 1999 compiled an extensive archive of Mexican newspaper and journal coverage of the feminicides (*[Un]Framing* 178). On the other hand, the author has managed to conjure up a universe of her own fiction and non-fiction writing, and editorial work, which all convey a more thorough and comprehensive representation of what the author labels "the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history" (*Making a Killing* 1). My analysis argues that the sophisticated portrayal and theorization of feminicides in *Desert Blood* make for a desired example of feminist theory-minded writing. At the same time, I also explain where the novel owes its readers more refinement in advocating for intercountry adoption, especially when the adoptive parent sees herself as a feminist, social justice-oriented scholar, but fails to account for the dynamics of power between her relatively privileged life and the biological mother's disenfranchised existence.

Works Cited

- Ackleson, Jason. "Constructing Security on the U.S.-Mexico Border." *Political Geography*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2005, pp. 165-84.
- Agosin, Marjorie. "All We Know About Them." *Secrets in the Sand: The Young Women of Ciudad Juárez*, translated by Celeste Kostopulos-Cooperman, White Pine Press, 2006, p. 25.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1999.

- Briggs, Laura. "Making 'American' Families: Transnational Adoption and U.S. Latin American Policy." *Haunted By Empire*, edited by Ann Laura Stoler, Duke UP, 2006, pp. 344-65.
- . *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption*. Duke UP, 2012.
- Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, Héctor, and Ignacio Corona, editors. *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representations and Public Response*. U of Arizona P, 2011.
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda, and Cynthia Bejarano, editors. *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Gaspar de Alba, Alicia. *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*. Arte Público Press, 2005.
- . *[Un]Framing the "Bad Woman:" Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause*. U of Texas P, 2014.
- Gaspar de Alba, Alicia, and Georgina Guzmán, editors. *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. U of Texas P, 2010.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575-99.
- Mata, Irene. "Writing on the Walls: Deciphering Violence and Institutionalization in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*." *Crime, Punishment, and Redemption*, Special Issue of *MELUS*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2010, pp. 15-40.
- Messmer, Marietta. "Transfrontera Crimes: Representations of the Juárez Femicides in Recent Fictional and Non-Fictional Accounts." *American Studies Journal*, no. 57, 2012, www.asjournal.org/57-2012/transfrontera-crimes/#. Accessed 19 Oct. 2012.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism*, Special Issue of *boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1984, pp. 333-58.
- Monárrez Fragoso, Julia. "Serial Sexual Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: 1993-2001." *Debate Femenista*, vol. 25, no. 13, 2002, www.womenontheborder.org/sex_serial_english.pdf. Accessed 13 Apr. 2019.
- Livingston, Jessica. "Murder in Juárez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, pp.67-70.
- López-Lozano, Miguel. "Women in the Global Machine: Patrick Bard's *La Frontera*, Carmen Galán Benitez's *Tierra Marchita*, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*." *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*, edited by Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona, U of Arizona P, 2010, pp. 128-53.
- Lorenz-Meyer, Dagmar. "Addressing the Politics of Location: Strategies in Feminist Epistemology and Their Relevance to Research Undertaken from a Feminist Perspective." *Thinking Borders: Gender Examinations of Rationality, Objectivity and the Knowing Subject*, edited by Marcela Linková and Alice Červinková, Academy of Science of the Czech Republic, 2005, pp. 75-94.

- Nash, June. "Women in Between: Globalization and the New Enlightenment." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2005, pp. 145-67.
- Radford, Jill, and Diana Russell. *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. Twayne Publishers, 1992.
- Ramazanoglu, Caroline, and Janet Holland. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. Sage, 2002.
- Rebolledo, Tey Diana. *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*. U of Arizona P, 1995.
- Russell, Diana. "Defining Femicide: Introductory Speech Presented to the United Nations Symposium on Femicide on 11/26/2012." www.dianarussell.com/f/Defining_Femicide_United_Nations_Speech_by_Diana_E._H._Russell_Ph.D.pdf. Accessed 13 Apr. 2019.
- Russell, Diana, and Roberta Harmes, editors. *Femicide in Global Perspective*. Teachers College Press, 2001.
- Sadowski-Smith, Claudia. "Imagining Transnational Chicano/a Activism against Gender-Based Violence at the U.S.-Mexican Border." *Imagined Transnationalism: U.S. Latino/a Literature, Culture and Identity*, edited by Kevin Concannon, Francisco A. Lomelí and Marc Priewe, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, pp. 75-93.
- Schatz, Sara. *Sexual Homicide of Women on the U.S.-Mexican Border*. Springer, 2017.
- Schmidt Camacho, Alicia. "Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women's Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2005, pp. 255-92.
- Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, pp. 773-97.
- Solinger, Rickie. *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*. Hill and Wang, 2001.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271-313.
- Staudt, Kathleen. *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*. U of Texas P, 2008.
- Volk, Steven S., and Marina E. Schlotterbeck. "Gender, Order, and Femicide: Reading the Popular Culture of Murder in Ciudad Juárez." *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán, U of Texas P, 2010, pp. 121-53.
- Wright, Melissa. *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. Routledge, 2006.
- . "Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2011, pp. 720-22.
- . "The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder Women and Maquiladoras." *Public Culture*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1999, pp. 453-74.