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## **Undying Protests: On Collective Action and Practices of Resistance against Femicide in Ciudad Juárez**

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**Undying Protests: On Collective Action and Practices of Resistance against  
Femicide in Ciudad Juárez**

A Dissertation Presented

by

ELVA F. OROZCO MENDOZA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2015

Department of Political Science

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**Undying Protests: On Collective Action and Practices of Resistance  
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ELVA F. OROZCO MENDOZA

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*For my mother and sister,  
F. Guadalupe Mendoza Loyo and Claudia Edith Orozco Mendoza,  
For all the love and courage  
you teach me everyday*

*To the mothers, activists, artists, journalists, students,  
and those who continue to raise their voices  
to denounce femicide and enforced disappearance  
in Ciudad Juárez*

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **UNDYING PROTESTS: ON COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PRACTICES OF RESISTANCE AGAINST FEMINICIDE IN CIUDAD JUÁREZ**

**FEBRUARY 2015**

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This dissertation project examines the wave of protests and practices of resistance that emerged in response to femicide—the murder, with state impunity, of women and girls because they are female—in the northern cities of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, Mexico. Its goal is to show how those women who live under extreme regimes of violence contest it since far too often social scientific studies that examine gender-based violence in northern Mexico have sought to understand its social, economic, and political roots. While this is indeed a significant contribution, this study aims to reflect politically on the innovative responses to the increasing normalization of violence and the injurious effects of global capitalism by drawing from the insights of political theory, feminist theory, violence studies and human rights scholarship, which I place in a sustained conversation with anti-femicide activism. Whereas Ciudad Juárez is commonly described as the world’s capital of women’s dead bodies, this dissertation offers a fresh contribution to the

existing femicide/feminicide literature by de-centering the overemphasis on violence in order to propose that we rethink the present context of the city from the standpoint of the protests and practices of resistance. I argue that collective activism in Ciudad Juárez not only offers a powerful critique against the state institutions that produce a systematic culture of impunity, but, more significantly, it represents a concerted effort to find more democratic solutions and alternatives to the problem of generalized violence. Thus, throughout this dissertation I will show that the anti-feminicide protests and practices of resistance developed in Juárez offer new forms of social and political organization that seek to repair state violence while generating global awareness about the persistent problem of feminicide. Therefore, I contend that the anti-feminicide struggle can be better understood through the analysis of four crucial practices: maternal activism, a practice that I term the *funeralization* of the city, human rights discourse and practice, and the ethics of care. I approach these practices as moments of interruption whereby those women who are more vulnerable to gender-based violence raise awareness about that vulnerability in order to redress it.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Miracles are clearly not supernatural events  
but only what all miracles, those performed by men  
no less than those performed by a divine agent, always must be,  
namely, interruptions of some natural series of events.<sup>1</sup>

Hannah Arendt

The girl's body turned up in a vacant lot in Colonia Las Flores.  
She was dressed in a white long-sleeved T-shirt and yellow knee-length skirt,  
a size too big. Some children playing in the lot found her and told their parents.  
One of the mothers called the police, who showed up half an hour later...  
This happened in 1993. January 1993. From then on, the killings of women  
began to be counted. But it's likely there had been other deaths before.  
The name of the first victim was... she was thirteen.<sup>2</sup>

Roberto Bolaño

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 166.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Bolaño and Natasha Wimmer, *2666*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 353.

## Introduction

How did Ciudad Juárez, Mexico come to represent the most extreme face of gender-based violence at the turn of the twenty-first century? Answers to this question often begin with a story similar to what Roberto Bolaño describes in “The Part about the Crimes,” the chapter in his novel *2666* where he narrates one of the most disturbing episodes in the history of Ciudad Juárez, recounting one by one a series of female homicides that took place in 1993.<sup>3</sup> In this year, dozens of women and girls were brutally killed and dumped in the city’s outskirts like sand in the desert.<sup>4</sup> The murdered women of Juárez suffered unspeakable deaths. They were snatched on their way to work or school and have never been seen again or were found dead. Their bodies—severely beaten, repeatedly raped, shot, stabbed, or strangled to death—were finally discarded in different parts of the city where passersby found them semi buried in dirt, desert sand, or filthy garbage. These unfortunate events forever changed the history of the city.

Ciudad Juárez, the so-called *maquiladora* official birthplace, is a metropolitan city bordering El Paso, Texas. It is located 231 miles northwest of Chihuahua City, the state’s capital. Both cities belong to the northern state of Chihuahua, which, according to the 2012 census, has a population of 3.5 million of people.<sup>5</sup> Juárez is famous for its low-cost, high quality manufacturing plants. But despite its flourishing *maquiladora* industry, the recurring killings of women observed since 1993,<sup>6</sup> and the presence of two powerful

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<sup>3</sup> Bolaño and Wimmer, *2666*, 351-634.

<sup>4</sup> Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, *Fábrica del Crimen*, (México, DF: Temas de Hoy, 2012), 28-31. All references to this book are the author’s translation.

<sup>6</sup> The murders documented after this year sparked lot of concern due to the frequency with which they occurred and also because gender-based homicides were surrounded by extreme impunity. See Esther Chávez Cano, Gloria Ramírez, and Ignacio Hernández, *Construyendo Caminos y Esperanzas* (Ciudad

drug cartels, gave the city a murderous reputation. Today, Juárez is depicted as a site of torture, massacre, and widespread impunity. In short, “a city of murdered women.”<sup>7</sup>

The killings are the most extreme face of a violence that was already visible in 1982, the year when former journalist and activist Esther Chávez Cano arrived into the city. As she explains, “Ciudad Juárez struck me as a city of women.” These women were everywhere, working at the *maquiladoras*, the shops, on the streets. You could always see them riding the public buses.”<sup>8</sup> Gender-based violence was also evident. Some of its clearest manifestations were rape, incest, bating, poverty, lack of education, verbal and physiological abuse, sexual exploitation, and so on. As Chávez Cano explains, some random cases made their way to the pages of two prominent local newspapers: *El Diario* and *Periodico Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. The stories reported in these newspapers revealed that the so-called city of women was also an extremely dangerous place. To be sure, in 1993, the total number of women murdered in Juárez summed 20; in 1994, they totaled 17. Another 27 women were killed in 1995, and, in 1996, the number ascended to 30.<sup>9</sup> The number of female homicides kept growing steadily. In 2010 alone, 584 women were killed.<sup>10</sup>

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Juárez, Chi: Casa Amiga Centro de Crisis, A.C., 2010). All references to this book are the author’s translation.

<sup>7</sup>Evelyn Nieves, “To work and Die in Juárez,” *Mother Jones Magazine* May/June 2002.

<sup>8</sup>Chávez Cano et al., *Construyendo Caminos*, 22.

<sup>9</sup>Information for this section is taken from the Esther Chávez Cano Collection, 1990-2006. Hosted in the New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections Department. The figures I am reporting were prepared by Rohy Benitez, Adriana Candia, Patricia Cabrera, Guadalupe de la Mora, Josefina Martinez, Ramona Ortiz, and Isabel Vazquez. See the Esther Chávez Cano papers.

<sup>10</sup>Centro de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres (CEDEM), Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas (JPNH), and Mukira, “Shadow Report for the 52<sup>nd</sup> CEDAW Session. Juárez and Chihuahua War on Drugs and CEDAW Recommendations,” (2012), 3, 8. Available at [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/CEDEHM-JPNH-MUKIRA\\_ForTheSession\\_E.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/CEDEHM-JPNH-MUKIRA_ForTheSession_E.pdf)

The murdered women have preponderantly been young women, ranging between 15 to 25 years of age.<sup>11</sup> As Sandra Rodriguez Nieto explained, the majority of them came from a working class family. Their occupations varied. Some worked at the maquiladoras, grocery shops, hotels, restaurants, bars, etc. Others were unemployed, homemakers, or students. Still others worked as maids, receptionists, bar tenders, or waitresses. These women were snatched in downtown Juárez in plain daylight. They were kept in captivity for several days, then killed and dumped in the desert, empty lots, or residential areas. Time and again, female corpses turned up with signs of torture, sexual abuse, and even mutilation. The majority of the families reported the women's disappearance to the police authorities. Yet, professional investigations rarely ensued. In fact, 95 percent of most murder cases, says John Gibler, are left in impunity.<sup>12</sup> Female disappearances were not taken seriously enough according to the families and women's organizations who complained that the failure to conduct professional investigations was producing an unprecedented number of deaths.<sup>13</sup> As a result, female corpses slowly began to invade the spaces of the living and have not abandoned the public sphere ever since.

In a sense, female homicides in Ciudad Juárez—or, feminicides—are not new. Much has been written about this topic in a wide range of disciplines and fields, including sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, education, and many more. Why then to write another doctoral dissertation on feminicidal violence? The answer to this

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<sup>11</sup> Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. "The Situation Of The Rights Of Women In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico: The Right To Be Free From Violence And Discrimination." OEA/Ser.L/V/II.117, Doc. 44, 7 march 2003. Available at <http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/2002eng/chap.vi.juarez.htm>

<sup>12</sup> In *To Die in Mexico*, John Gibler explains that the impunity rate in Mexico is "of at least 95 percent" in all murder cases and "an accompanying drastic increase in all manner of crime from kidnapping to oil theft." See John Gibler, *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from Inside the Drug War*, (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2011), 194. While Gibler is specifically referring to the impunity rate during the Felipe Calderon administration, his report is consistent with the figures recorded by human rights organizations and the victims' families in Ciudad Juárez.

<sup>13</sup> Nieves, "To work and Die in Juárez;" Rodríguez Nieto, *Fábrica*.

question is both simple as well as complex. At one level, a plethora of excellent studies exist that take on the task of critiquing the patriarchal, economic, and political structures of power that led to the killings. Broadly speaking these works have attempted to hold these power structures accountable for their omissions, impositions, and domination.<sup>14</sup> In addition, since 1993, a group of academics, feminists, activists, and journalists have sought to make gender-based violence visible inside Mexico and around the world. In this endeavor, they have contended that the killings of women are a complex phenomenon, which is not reducible to a single cause or event and which cannot be attributed to a single criminal. Thus, existing scholarly and activist attempts to understand the roots of the violence have raised some central questions, including where did the violence come from? Who is responsible for it? Under what conditions did it emerge and multiply throughout the years? And why extreme violence against poor women was overlooked?

While these are extremely important questions, in the process of demystifying the mechanisms of power that created the conditions of possibility for the feminicide to occur, violence—rather than collective action or resistance—has defined the city's identity. This is unfortunate given that Ciudad Juárez has a rich history of protest and community organizing. To be sure, the murders of women led to the creation of a prolific and dynamic anti-feminicide movement formed by the victims' mothers, families, and their allies, which has persisted in its efforts to denounce feminicide until today. At the same time, a plethora of women's organizations emerged to make gender-based violence

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<sup>14</sup> The literature on this topic is so vast to be able to list it here. Some of the most influential studies in this respect are: Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona, *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010); Rodríguez Nieto, *Fábrica*; Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women's Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, (2005): 255-292; Wright, *Disposable Women*.

visible and to provide legal, psychological, and even financial support for the victims of violence. These organizations are at the forefront of the national struggle to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women inside the country and around the world. More significantly, they have sparked a global awareness campaign to name femicide as a new modality of crime whose principal targets are working class women. This concerted effort to investigate, document, name, and understand the nature of femicide inspired a global awareness campaign unlike any that we have seen before, enabling the production of an analytical framework to designate a problem that surpasses the specific context of the city. But despite the significance of this contribution, the understandable emphasis on violence in Juárez has had the effect of pushing to the backstage the permanent campaign to denounce femicide as well as the concrete practices that seek to resist it. For example, practices like the permanent protest campaign launched by the victims' mothers, the reappropriation of spatial and material object to preserve the memory of the killings, the human rights campaign to call government officials accountable for disregarding the families' demands, or the practice of *acompañamiento* are rarely discussed as events of utmost political importance. In contrast, events that concern themselves with the city's violence occupy a central place in the political debate.

My goal in this dissertation is to bring those protest and practices of resistance back to the center of the political analysis not because I consider that femicidal violence is not relevant. It is. Rather, my contention is that the key to understand this modality of violence and its possible solutions is found in the anti-femicide struggle deployed in Ciudad Juárez. For this reason, I approach femicide from the perspective of the victims' mothers, relatives, and activists who continue to invent new forms to make femicide

visible. To that end, the guiding questions that inform my study are: what forms of political agency are possible in a city hit by intense violence? What the critique of politics would be if we take seriously the protests and practices of resistance initiated in Ciudad Juárez? What new knowledge emerges out of the anti-feminicide movement that helps us to counter the violence? What solutions to the problem of feminicide are being proposed with what political implications?

To answer these questions, I take inspiration from Susana Rotker's methodological framework, which suggests that we approach the city "as if it were a text with omissions, repetitions, and characters; with dialogues, spaces, and periods and commas."<sup>15</sup> This text, Rotker notes, is written by residents of the city since they are the ones who suffer and challenge multiple forms of violence on a daily basis. Following Rotker, I offer a bottom up, rather than a top-down, account of feminicidal violence and the protests and practices of resistance initiated in response. While I agree that demystifying the hidden mechanisms that produce a phenomenon like feminicide is both an important and an urgent task, I also consider that is better accomplished if we shift our gaze in the direction of concrete acts of resistance. For example, women's involvement in the anti-feminicide movement has been crucial to understand the nature of the crime of feminicide, which according to the activists "lies in the fact that the victims were women and poor."<sup>16</sup> The statement here calls for attention to the ways in which issues of class and gender combine to exclude working class women from economic, social, legal, and political protection supposedly granted to all Mexican citizens regardless of their gender, class, of racial background.

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<sup>15</sup> Susana Rotker and Katherine Goldman, *Citizens of Fear: Urban Violence in Latin America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Chávez Cano et al., *Construyendo Caminos*, 90.

There is a great potential gain if we look closely to the protests and practices of resistance launched by the victims' mothers and their allies in Ciudad Juárez . First, taking this approach encourages a more sustained and productive engagement with what I call activist epistemologies: the knowledge that emerges from the actions, practices, provocations, and contestations of those women and men who take to the streets to demand justice for women, while also seeking to build a more pluralistic society where individuals support each other. Second, I want to highlight the contributions of the mothers, artists, women's organizations, and independent activists in the anti-femicide struggle since anti-femicide protestors have fought to tell their own stories in a city where state representatives constantly deny them this right. In this endeavor, they have taken an active role in the struggle to end gender-based violence instead of remaining passive victims of government institutions that deny them this right even if violence against women continues. This story of struggle and endurance, I will argue, has a lot to teach to feminism and political theory even if not all the protestors consider themselves feminists or are interested in the history of political thought and ideas.

While anti-femicide activist continuously risk becoming a target of state repression, they still made a decision to protest the injustice behind the killings and disappearance of hundreds of women and girls. In doing so, they have changed the present history of the city to one where women's agency and their acts of resistance are not reducible to a totalizing view of violence. As I will show in the chapters to come, maternal activists and their allies have contested assumptions of women's invisibility and submission. While it is true that an unprecedented number of women have been killed in Ciudad Juárez since 1993, anti-femicide protestors have shown with their actions that



women are never solely victims. On the contrary, as former activist Irma Campos Madrigal once claimed, “nuestra lucha no es por el simple imperio del derecho, sino también por nuestras hijas, nuestras madres, nuestras abuelas, nuestras hermanas. Auténticamente por nuestro genero y por una sociedad abierta. (Our struggle is not only for the empire of law, it is also for our daughters, our mothers, our grand mothers, [and] our sisters... [This struggle] is authentically for our gender and for an open society).”<sup>17</sup> Campos’ words show that the act of demanding justice for the women brutally killed or disappeared, is at the same time a struggle to give women an equal place in society and politics. The struggle against violence, in other words, is also a struggle for inclusion, equality, and, by extension, democracy. It is this struggle to build an open society what interests me in this dissertation.

But why is this study on protests and practices of resistance against femicide still relevant? First, I see a great risk in portraying Ciudad Juárez as the epicenter of violence given the government’s attempt to intensify the militarization of the border based on the claim that more police forces and soldiers are required to contain the violence before it spreads to other, presumably, less violent places like The United States. In this case, violence is pathologized as a problem of the south that threatens the more “civilized” north. Second, as I mentioned before, women’s contributions to the understanding and theorization of gender-based violence are oftentimes ignored by discourses that emphasize their victimhood status. Yet, women’s responses to the violence show that different forms of social and political organization are possible and that resistance against femicidal violence can indeed enrich human life and interactions.

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<sup>17</sup> Irma Campos, “Éxodo por La Vida: ¡Ni Una Mas!” Comunicado issued at the inauguration of the Éxodo por La Vida: ¡Ni Una Mas! Campaign in Chihuahua City. March 8, 2002.

Finally, as Irma Campos noted, Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua is not full of criminals, “there are many decent women and men who are generous, honest, and who cannot be fooled easily.”<sup>18</sup> These generous women have refused to be reduced to the status of living dead men and women perpetually condemned to murder and extermination.

In this dissertation, I use the terms narratives of violence and narratives of denial to discuss how existing accounts that emphasize the violence, or deny it, relegate to a second place the vibrant manifestations of resistance observed in the city. By narratives of violence I mean the hundreds of stories that stress the intense violence observed in Ciudad Juárez, particularly since 2008 when former president Felipe Calderon declared the war on drugs. I claim that this narrative is dangerous because it fuels the conventional geopolitical dichotomy between the prosperous north and the barbaric south, depicting Ciudad Juárez as a city out of control and complete chaos. The drugs economy, disproportional poverty, institutional corruption, and impunity have further caricatured Juárez as the most violent city in the world.

Like David, the child-robot in Steven Spielberg’s *Artificial Intelligence*, whose role is exclusively that of a son, it is almost always assumed that Juárez is a city-machine, whose only role is to manufacture violence. For instance in 2666 Roberto Bolaño depicts the city as “one of the few hellholes in the world.”<sup>19</sup> Marcela Turati, in turn, argued that, since 2008, Juárez became “*la maquiladora nacional de muertos*” (the national factory of dead bodies). Sandra Rodriguez Nieto, a local journalist, also considers that the “mas production of dead bodies has turned the city into a *fabrica del crimen* (a crime

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Bolaño and Wimmer, 2666, 196.

factory).”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Sergio Gonzalez Rodriguez renamed the city in 2012, and called her “the femicide-machine.”<sup>21</sup> While the association of violence and Ciudad Juárez is not without support, the violence narrative has helped to produce an image of the city that reduces it to its criminal context, thereby erasing everyday acts of resistance which pursue a better justice from public memory.

In contrast, narratives of denial are used to negate the fact that the city confronts a situation whereby femicide crimes occur systematically. The narrative of denial is produced through public discourses that conceal the fact that poor women face a situation of systematic discrimination. For example, ex Chihuahua State Governor, Patricio Martinez once claimed that the killings are “normal crimes” that occur in any major city.<sup>22</sup> With this statement ex governor Martinez implied that the murdered women of Juárez are not in danger and that organized crime is “normal,” and therefore inevitable. Narratives of denial are also utilized by government agencies to deny the families women the right to file an official complain related to enforced disappearance, domestic violence, rape, or any other form of grievance involving gender violence. As it has been commonly reported, public officials in these agencies send the families back home to deal with the issue on their own and even ask them to do their own investigations and to report the results to the police.

The denial and violence narratives are limiting because they both underestimate the work that many women and men do to survive. Current representations of violence in Ciudad Juárez are discussed in a way that they either erase its existence (narrative of denial) or they present it as having penetrated everything and everybody (narrative of

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<sup>20</sup> Sandra Rodríguez Nieto. In discussion with the author, July, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Sergio González Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotexte, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Chávez Cano et al., *Construyendo Caminos*, 88.

violence).<sup>23</sup> Violence is presented as a phenomenon beyond comprehension to the point that people may find it hard to believe that something can be done to change it. In this perspective, the present seems to have been withdrawn from the world and all that is left to do is to yearn for a return to a past where this excessive violence did not exist, or to hope for a better future in which the community shattered by violence will be renewed. The present looks too overwhelming to be understood, let alone changed, as journalist Rodríguez Nieto explained. In her words: “in the Mexican context, where there is a huge margin of impunity, very few elements exist that people can use to comprehend what is happening. The capacity, or the elements we have to explain what is happening are very limited.”<sup>24</sup> As this statement clearly shows, the overwhelming presence of violence suggests that people’s capacity of comprehension is been shattered with the violence.

The narrative of denial also refuses the possibility of understanding because it pretends that femicide crimes never existed, were provoked by the victims, or belong to a distant past, which the community must overcome to allow social healing. From this perspective, it is important to move past discussions of femicide to construct an image of the city as a safe place for investment and transnational entrepreneurship. Anti-femicide protesters are accused of hindering the prosperity of the city because it scares

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<sup>23</sup> The journalistic reports about the violence in Ciudad Juárez overwhelmingly support this argument. Yet, for a concrete example readers are alerted towards Charles Bowden’s “Mexico’s Red Days,” *GQ* (July 2008). Bowden, one of the most influential journalists in Ciudad Juárez, has argued numerous times that the violence in the city is beyond anyone’s grasp. In “Mexico’s Red Days” he writes: “There was a time when dead made sense in Juárez. You died because you had a drug load or because you lost a drug load. You died because you tried to make a deal or because you were a snitch, and because you were a poor woman and it was dark and someone thought it might be fun to rape and kill you... Now the world has changed... The killings have the cold feeling of butchery in a slaughterhouse, and they are everywhere... I see... a new way of life [emerging], one *beyond our imagination* and *beyond* the code words we use to protect ourselves from the horror of violence. In this new way of life, no one is really in charge—and no one is safe. The violence has crossed class lines. The violence is everywhere. It has no apparent and simple source. It is like the dust in the air, part of life itself.” Emphasis added. The entire article can be found at: <http://www.gq.com/news-politics/big-issues/200807/-mexico-border-murder-drug-war>.

<sup>24</sup> Rodríguez Nieto. In discussion with the author, July, 2013.

investors away who may find countries like China or India more attractive. For this reason, protests are repressed, silenced, or jailed since they are a threat to the political and financial stability of the city. In the same vein, femicide memorials are concealed, human rights discourses are coopted, and gender-based crimes are masked as drug-related vendettas in an attempt to negate femicide. How then does one go about narrating the present (hi)story of Ciudad Juárez? From what point of view or perspective must we document this (hi)story?

To answer this question I draw on *Burdens of Political Responsibility: Narrative and the Cultivation of Responsiveness*, a book by Jade Larissa Schiff where she contends that stories give us “an account of some features of ourselves and our world.”<sup>25</sup> Stories help us to understand the events that shape our experiences of every day reality while also influencing how we think and react to those experiences. How we make sense of the world that surrounds us is, according to Schiff, the result of the stories we tell. Stories create realities, or so the saying goes. However, as Schiff makes it clear, stories always illuminate one aspect of a particular problem while obscuring others. For Michel-Rolph Trouillot the construction of history is the result of power relations. This is the central argument in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* where he claims that, “history is the fruit of power.”<sup>26</sup> By this, Trouillot does not only mean that victors make (hi)story, more essentially for him, history is a social process and power relations are implicated in this process.

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<sup>25</sup> Jade L. Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility: Narrative and the Cultivation of Responsiveness*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), xix.

Every story has silences and it could be the case that listening<sup>27</sup> to those silences may bring a whole new world into view. Yet, for Trouillot, it is naïve to think that such silences are so transparent that all we need to do is simply to pay attention to them. Indeed, a theory of the historical narrative, he says, must recognize the existence of the distinction and overlap between process and narrative—that is, between what happened and that which is said to have happened.<sup>28</sup> This means recognizing that multiple actors participate in the process of producing historical knowledge, but also understanding that “history changes with time and place, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives.”<sup>29</sup> Here, Trouillot’s central insight is that history is not a fixed event that belongs there in the past waiting to be retrieved through memory. On the contrary, in his view, the past exists in the narratives we create about it. This is important because, for Trouillot, the past should be approached as a recollection of multiple silences, activated through new narratives. More specifically for Trouillot, “the past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there or here. But nothing is inherently over here or over there. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus in no way can we identify past as past.”<sup>30</sup>

What interests me in Trouillot’s argument is his idea that the past does not exist as pastness. Rather history, or the past, is made and remade through the narration and the resurrection of neglected silences. This approach, however, is equally true for the

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<sup>27</sup> This is the central argument in Schiff, *Burdens*.

<sup>28</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 25

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*,

(hi)story of the present. Just as the past does not exist as past, I would argue, the present does not exist as present. Indeed, in the case of Ciudad Juárez the narrative of violence alongside the narrative of denial conceals the present existence of the protests and logics of resistance. Because of this, it is important to approach the present through the silences that dominant narratives create. If, Trouillot is right to assert that in no way we can identify the past as past and, moreover, that power dynamics silenced the past, isn't equally important to ask what power mechanisms silence the present? This dissertation is an attempt to resurrect the silences of the present in Ciudad Juárez by exercising the practice of responsive listening. This practice, in the words of John Givler, is attentive to the stories of those women and men who have suffered nameless violence while seeking to avoid reproducing that violence in the writing process.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, this dissertation privileges the voices of the activists, artists, journalists, human rights and anti-femicide organizations in an attempt to give an account of the Juárez that is being negated through the violence and denial narratives.

But while I aim to reevaluate the anti-femicide protests and to decenter the violence, I do not claim that this study will provide the definite “truth” about the complexity of femicide. Because, as Schiff notes, “every story is told from a perspective,”<sup>32</sup> this study seeks to complicate existing stories and narratives about Ciudad Juárez in order to advance the argument that the present history of the city is also defined by the vitality of collective action and resistance. Unquestionably, Juárez’s contemporary

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<sup>31</sup> Here I want to be clear that my goal is not to deny that gender-based violence in Ciudad Juárez is an alarming reality, for I believe it is. Moreover, gender based violence has been indeed intensified because of the war on drugs. However, I do believe that there are other equally important questions to ask with respect to Ciudad Juárez. These questions have to do with the choices we, political theorists make, about documenting the contemporary context of a war-devastated city like Ciudad Juárez.

<sup>32</sup> Schiff, *Burdens*, 11.

history lives in newspapers, journal articles, the thousands of publications seeking to critique the structural forms of violence that attempt against the lives of thousands of women and girls. Yet, this history also lives in the streets, parks, and the fragmented neighborhoods, which have developed new logics of care and social organization to mitigate the violence.

In this respect, this study participates in the feminist tradition that supports the notion that researchers are neither engaged in research for truth nor are they focused on discovering a single reality. While I claim that my work brings into view a different way to look at the present context of Ciudad Juárez, this interpretation must forcibly coexist with others. To that end, I am bound to make some omissions in my effort to reflect about what the protests and practices of resistance against femicide might mean politically as practices that seek to interrupt the recurring episodes of violence. Even so, this study is an effort to think the present context of Ciudad Juárez differently and to offer an account of how the protests, logics, and practices of resistance contest the violence.

To offer this alternative reading of the city, I draw from the concerted resources of political theory, feminist theory, violence studies, human rights scholarship, and anti-femicide activism in Ciudad Juárez. More specifically, I draw on the political thought of Hannah Arendt, Wendy Brown, Jean Bennett, and Joan Tronto, among others and put them in a sustained conversation with a number of activists, artists, and Journalists who have dedicated significant efforts to make sense of Ciudad Juárez's most pressing predicaments. In their theories, studies, analysis, and concrete practices I find a rich archive that allows me to 1) offer a more accurate picture of women's agency and resistance at the border, 2) pursue a political analysis that can better account for the



contributions of the activists in Ciudad Juárez, and 3) consider the implications of these forms of resistance for contemporary forms of political and social organizing. In what follows, then, I discuss three concrete practices that include: maternal activism, the production of human rights discourse and practice, *acompañamiento* as an ethic of care, and finally a practice that I term the *funeralization* of the city. I chose to focus on these practices for the simple reason that they are the more visible manifestations of resistance against government corruption and impunity. In that sense, the practices contain a direct critique of the state institution and its attempt to transfer the blame to the victims themselves. For example, as I explain in chapter 2, maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez emerged not as an attempt to promote maternal virtues and values but mainly because the responsibility of conducting the investigations regarding women's enforced disappearance fell into the mothers themselves. To that end, each of these practices will reveal, first, a commitment to dismantle the silence and concealment behind narratives of denial and, second, women's efforts to end femicide while also promoting a more just society in contrast to those narratives that depict Juárez as a site of darkness, barbarism, and unruliness, which pathologizes violence as a problem of the global south.

A thorough discussion of each of these practices will reveal how participants in the anti-femicide movement have untangled the complexity behind femicide crimes, revealing, in doing so, the practices and structures of power that produce and sustain femicide. It will also show that human cooperation and trust are not only desired to win the anti-femicide struggle. In fact, these sentiments and values are absolutely essential if one wants to counter the violence. Collective action is thus essential in the battle against femicide, but equally essential are feelings of trust, love, and friendship.

Without such feelings, it is hard to imagine that any significant progress can be achieved in the struggle for justice.

### **Plan of the Dissertation**

This argument about the logics of protests and practices of resistance unfolds in seven chapters, five of which examine four key practices of resistance: maternal activism, the production of human rights discourse and practice, the funeralization of the city, and the practice of *acompañamiento* or, the logics of care. Taken as a whole, these chapters seek to illustrate the different paths which have been appropriated to protest femicide and the normalization of violence. It is important to note, however, that these studies are not meant to be an exhaustive list of the practices devised for this purpose. Clearly many more practices could have been included in this study. However, I chose to focus on those practices which are more visible in the anti-femicide struggle in an attempt to understand the meaning that protest organizations give them. The chapters in this dissertation show some of the most salient forms that anti-femicide protestors in Ciudad Juárez have deployed to critique the violence while also finding different alternatives to build a more open society as activist Irma Campos declared.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic of femicide, commonly defined as “the murder, with state impunity, of women and girls because they are female.”<sup>33</sup> As I mentioned above, the recurring killings of women under extreme conditions of sexual and physical violence became known in 1993, thanks to the work of a former journalist, Ester Chávez

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<sup>33</sup> Rosa-Linda Fregoso, “Witnessing and the Poetics of Corporality,” *Kalfou* 1 (2009): 8; Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3-8.

Cano, who took on the task of documenting these horrendous crimes through the recollection of news clippings. Though I agree with prominent feminist scholars, activists, and journalists that the task of critique—defined as an intellectual exercise aimed to demystify the mechanism of power that created the conditions of possibility for the killings to occur—continues to be extremely important. I hope to have made clear in this chapter that the central task of this dissertation is to approach the important work of critique through the protests and practices of resistance developed in response to femicide. In so doing, I propose to recenter the moments of freedom, agency, contestation, empowerment, and democratic participation found in these logics of resistance. This chapter also makes the argument that political theorists need to be more attentive to activist epistemologies in order to maintain a more sustained dialogue with those individuals who suffer, but also contest the violence and to consider more seriously their political solutions to the problems they face. This task is crucial because, as we will see in the rest of the chapters, the violence may be better addressed if understood and criticized from the point of view of those who suffer and challenge it on a daily basis.

These remarks about the anti-femicide protests and practices of resistance motivate the next five chapters in which I examine four different forms of contesting the violence: maternal activism, the production of human rights discourse and practice, the funeralization of the city, and the practice of *acompañamiento* or, the logics of care. In chapter 2, “The Mothers of Chihuahua: Between Self-disclosure and the Politics of Visibility,” I provide a brief account of the emergence of maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez. The chapter addresses the central question, what version of maternal activism developed in response to femicide and is maternal activism politically subversive? To

answer this question, I first trace the emergence of maternal activism through the stories of Paula Flores and Marisela Escobedo, two emblematic figures of the anti-femicide struggle who engaged in maternal activism after learning that their respective daughters were murdered in the most terrible way. I argue that maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez emerged from death and injury and not as an attempt to universalize the experience of mothering. In other words, maternal activism is a form of resistance through which the victims' mothers bring to light the shocking violence against women and the practices that produce and sustain that violence. The second argument I pursue in this chapter is that maternal activism, since its inception, has pursued a politics of visibility that operates through acts of self-disclosure, including the mothers' detailed revelation of their own personal stories to counter the government's lies and attempts to attribute blame towards the victims themselves.

Chapter 3, "Born into a World of Freedom: An Arendtian Reconsideration of Maternal Activism in Ciudad Juárez," extends the discussion on maternal activism, this time through a critical engagement with Hannah Arendt's concepts of freedom and the child in *The Human Condition*. This is a novel contribution to the existing literature on maternal activism since Hanna Arendt's political thought has not been sufficiently explored next to this topic despite that her concepts stress the importance of political participation and engagement that is, I would argue, still relevant for any activist involvement. For Hannah Arendt, freedom is almost identical with the capacity to begin and the child is said to embody this capacity since the birth of each new human being implies that a new beginning arises and adds its voice in the world. In Ciudad Juárez, the

murdered of women and girls represent the obliteration of this capacity, but the mother's struggle against femicide is an act of freedom meant to preserve it.

The central claim that this chapter makes is that women's mobilization of motherhood to protest femicide is a political act, whereby both biological and self-authorized mothers assert their right to protest femicide and to demand justice on behalf of the victims. In that sense, I redefine maternal activism as an act of political freedom since the victims' mothers, as well as their supporters, appear publicly to demand that the crimes are investigated and the victims' murderers are brought to justice. Arendt's concept of freedom highlights people's capacity to appear in public where the things that they do and say are rendered significant. I argue that their public appearance exceeds the mothers' seeming status as private and depoliticized human beings.

In chapter 4, "Human Rights Discourse and Practice" enriches the analysis of women's agency through a careful investigation into the human rights campaign and its relation to the anti-femicide struggle. In this chapter, I pursue a genealogical analysis to underscore the process whereby human rights discourse was adopted to condemn government corruption and impunity. In the year 2000 women's organizations launched an important campaign to frame femicide as a violation of women's human rights. But how exactly did this campaign begin? Who were its main proponents? What are its political implications? I examine these questions alongside the figure of Ester Chávez Cano, a former journalist and founder of the organization Casa Amiga. Chávez Cano's participation in the human rights campaign is, according to most activists, essential since she pioneered the struggle to make gender based violence in Ciudad Juárez visible. In this chapter, I also move from questions that investigate the relationship between human

rights and the anti-femicide struggle to a larger exploration of the process that deploys human rights discourses and norms. This chapter draws on interviews with representatives of four major human rights organizations in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, including: El Centro de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, CEDEM, Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, Centro de Derechos Humanos Paso del Norte, and la Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos en Chihuahua.

Chapter 5, “*Acompañamiento* and the Ethics of Care” looks more closely at the logics of care and resistance developed in response to femicide. Here the notion of *acompañamiento* and the ethics of care is not to be taken as an utopian aspiration that anti-femicide protesters have crafted for themselves. Rather, this chapter asks what logic or logics of safety and protection developed in Ciudad Juárez in the face of increasing mistrust of government and military institutions, with what social and political consequences. This chapter will also discuss how these logics of care and resistance are deeply connected with specific spaces like neighborhoods, schools and more. Drawing on ideas developed by Joan Tronto, particularly her theorization of an ethic of care, as well as the practice of *acompañamiento*, I present the program called *Compañeras Solidarias*, as an exemplary case that illustrates how a new ethics of care has been developed by Ciudad Juárez’s inhabitants in order to protect themselves from the violence. *Acompañamiento* shows that collective action alongside sentiments of love, friendship, and trust are essential to preserve life in a city where life is always at stake.

Chapter 6: “Femicide and the Funeralization of the City” addresses the central theme of this dissertation—protests and practices of resistance—from the perspective of spatial and material objects. In other words, “Femicide and the Funeralization of the

City” discusses anti-femicide protests from the angle of nonhuman objects. Because of this, in this chapter, I seek to destabilize the binary of human vs. non-human action through the concept of the *funeralization of the city*, which I define as a set of performative acts that mobilize public spaces as well as material objects to inscribe the ongoing resistance against femicidal violence in the landscape of the city. The *funeralization of the city* grows out of the activists’ organization of and participation in funerary rites, candlelight vigils, the installment of pink crosses throughout the city, and the public exhibits of women’s portraits in the city walls to make femicide crimes visible. The central argument advanced in this chapter is that spatial environments and material objects are also vehicles for protests which extend the short lived temporality of these events, rendering collective action more permanent while showing how the spatial boundaries that separate the dead from the living have been blurred in Ciudad Juárez and the rest of Mexico.

The chapters that comprise this dissertation share more than a concern to describe different attempts to denounce femicidal violence. They also share the assumption that women in Ciudad Juárez cannot be reduced to the role of passive victims since, for more than two decades now, these women have produced a rich history of resistance that scholars and journalists need to acknowledge. In this sense, the analysis of four central practices of resistance supplements the narratives of violence and denial described above by bringing into view a new vision regarding how Ciudad Juárez’s inhabitants live together in a so-called murderous city. Thus, chapter 7 concludes this study by offering some reflections that consider human plurality from the standpoint of the practices discussed in previous chapters. What new forms of organizing together emerge? How do

these practices challenge or reinforce our current political imagination? The task is to explore ways to live and behave more responsibly and ethically towards human plurality and to consider what changes in the way of relating to one another are needed to achieve this new ethic.

In these different chapters, I continually insist that the intense presence of violence in Ciudad Juárez should never be seen as too overwhelming to be understood, let alone changed. After all, much of the senseless and unilateralist violence that has proliferated in the recent years is been documented and analyzed by those who experience it every day. Interdisciplinary in nature, “Undying Protests” offers a contribution to contemporary efforts to understand protests and collective action in political science, including political scientists with interests in Latin American politics, social movements, indigenous movements, protest politics, transnational activism, democratic participation, and democratic theory and practice. It will be appealing to political theorists, anthropologists, and sociologists concerned with questions regarding spaces of resistance, the spatial turn, and what is called new materiality. This work also speaks to those with interest in affect theory, trauma studies, and radical political thought. Finally, this dissertation will be of interest to political theorists who seek novel ways to connect contemporary political theory with empirical case studies in Latin America.

A final consideration is in order. Although the original versions of the essays collected here were written separately, they have been set to dialogue with one another in ways that were not conceivable when the dissertation project first arose. In this sense, what has made all the chapters to communicate in novel and unexpected ways is a common concern with the ways in which the narrative of violence and the narrative of



denial silence the numerous manifestations of resistance undertaken by the victims' mothers and a plethora of other actors who solidarize with the anti-femicide movement. This journey begins with a study of maternal activism to the extent that the victims' mothers were the first to organize to denounce femicide. The presentation of the chapters, however, does not follow a specific progression in the development of the anti-femicide movement. Rather my goal is to present different practices used in the struggle against violence. In this sense, the practices must be understood to work simultaneously and in complement of each other rather than operating in a successive spectrum that follows a linear progression of events and response.

## CHAPTER 2

### LAS MADRES DE CHIHUAHUA: SELF-DISCLOSURE AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

#### Muerte Suspendida [Suspended Death]

Yo las he visto son como fantasmas

algunas deambulan sin rumbo

no se acostumbran a la ausencia

Los ojos secos despojados de lágrimas

recorren los vacíos poblados de recuerdos

se desplazan ciegas casi sordas casi mudas

Encienden el fuego de sus cocinas

vano intento de sentirse vivas envueltas en sombras

mantienen abiertas las heridas

Quieren morir con quien las dejó

y no pueden morir por su partida

no sobreviven mantienen su muerte suspendida

Yo las he escuchado son como animas

ahogan en sollozos el dolor que cargan

las voces de la memoria les taladran el alma

La amnesia general las apuñala  
el olvido de las autoridades las mata  
caminan una y otra vez las mismas pisadas

No conocen la palabra resignación  
y su sonido las enferma de amargura  
sus muertos existen y también son nuestros

Yo las he abrazado están vivas  
cargan con todo el dolor del mundo y no se doblan  
son las madres de Chihuahua

[I have seen them, they are like ghosts  
Some wander about without direction  
They don't accept the absence

Their eyes have dried out of tears  
Walking around empty towns of memory  
They move eye blinded, almost deaf almost mute

They light up the fire in their kitchens  
A vain attempt to feel alive when covered by shadows  
They keep the wounds open

They want to die along with those who parted them  
But they can't die because of their departure

These women not just survive; they keep death suspended

I have heard them they are like lost souls  
Drowning in tears the pain they carry  
The voices of memory perforate their souls

The general forgetfulness stabs them  
The obliviousness of the authorities kills them  
But they walk the same steps time and again

They do not know the word acceptance  
And their own sound sickens them with bitterness  
Their dead exist but they are ours too

I have embraced them they are alive  
They carry all the pain in the world but they don't bend  
They are the mothers of Chihuahua]<sup>34</sup>

Ricardo Anzaldua

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<sup>34</sup> Fragments from Ricardo Anzaldua's poem *Muerte Suspendida*. Unpublished. Chihuahua, Chi. June, 2012. The author shared this poem with me after we met for a conversation related to my visit to Juárez. Then, I expressed to him my interest in the mothers' protests against feminicide. After our conversation Anzaldua email me his poem since he thought it could be a nice addition to my research. The poem is inspired on the mothers' struggle to find truth and justice for their daughters. All references to this poem are the author's translation.

## Introduction: Maternal activism and the Politics of Visibility

Femicide in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, Mexico provides a compelling case study to examine contemporary debates on maternal activism. While studies on this topic are prominent in Latin America and many other countries around the world,<sup>35</sup> in northern Mexico maternal activism continues to be understudied, albeit not completely neglected, in the existing literature. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the overwhelming majority of academic discussions on femicide have sought to understand the socioeconomic transformations and political dislocations that created a climate of gendered structural violence. To elaborate, existing femicide literature has emphasized the transnational aspect of Ciudad Juárez and its *maquiladora* industry, indicating that the killings are the unintended consequences of the globalization process and its tendency to dehumanize workers through degrading hiring practices—in particular, poor women.<sup>36</sup> Others have criticized the government for conducting poor investigations, covering up criminals, and blaming the victims for their own deaths.<sup>37</sup> A third approach examines the

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<sup>35</sup> Argentina is perhaps the most famous example where Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo have inspired countless analyses that look at similar movements in Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and many other countries. See for example Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation?: Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11 (Summer 1985): 227-254; Nora A. Femenia, "Argentina's Mothers of Plaza De Mayo: The Mourning Process from Junta to Democracy," *Feminist Studies* 13 (1987): 9-18; Marguerite G. Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo* (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994); Jane S. Jaquette, *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); Lynn Stephen, *Women and Social Movements in Latin America: Power From Below* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> See for example Rosa-Linda Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!: The Politics and Culture of Human Rights," *Social Identities* 12 (March 2006): 109-138; Jessica Livingston, "Murder in Juárez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 25 (2004): 59-76; Wright, *Disposable Women*.

<sup>37</sup> Cynthia L. Bejarano, "Las Super Madres de Latinoamerica," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23 (2002): 126-150; Griselda Gutiérrez Castañeda, ed., *Violencia Sexista: Algunas Claves para la*

persistence of patriarchal norms and practices inside the government, which allow gender-based violence to go unpunished.<sup>38</sup> Thus, while there is a vast body of literature, few scholars have pursued a study of femicide from the perspective of the victims' mothers.<sup>39</sup> My aim in this chapter is to do this; that is, to examine femicide by taking into consideration the mothers' standpoint as it developed in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City. Accordingly, the central questions that this chapter investigates are: who are the Mothers of Chihuahua? What is the (hi)story behind this name? Why did maternal activism develop in response to femicide and enforced disappearance? How is maternalism performed in the context of intense violence? Finally, to what extent is maternal activism politically subversive?

In this chapter, I address the aforementioned questions to provoke some reflections about maternal activism in northern Mexico. The first of these reflections is that maternal activism arises not, as is often assumed, from the actual experience of giving birth, though many activists did, but from death and/or injury. The second is that maternal activism is a process whereby the victims' mothers use their individual stories as well as bodies to reveal 1) the shocking violence against women, 2) the practices that produce and sustain that violence, and 3) the state institutions that systematically discriminate against women. I argue that maternal activism, since its inception, has pursued what I term a politics of visibility: a series of actions as well as performances

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*Comprensión del Femicidio en Ciudad Juárez* (México, DF: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004); Diana Washington Valdez, *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women: The Truth About Mexico's Bloody Border Legacy* (Los Angeles, CA: Peace at the Border, 2006); Wright, *Disposable Women*.

<sup>38</sup> Amnesty International, "Mexico-Intolerable Killings: Ten years of abductions and murders in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua," 2003, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR41/027/2003>; Fregoso and Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women*; Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "Body Counts on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Femicidio, Reification, and the Theft of Mexicana Subjectivity," *Chicana/Latina Studies* 4 (2004): 22-60.

<sup>39</sup> Some exceptions are Bejarano, "Super Madres;" Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!;" Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "Ciudadana X," and multiple articles by Melissa w. Wright.

that reveal the practices and government institutions which participate in the concealment of feminicidal violence and enforced disappearance.

This politics of visibility<sup>40</sup> operates through acts of self-disclosure that involve, among other things, narrating the mothers' own individual stories of pain, suffering, and abandonment due to the experience of having lost a daughter and using the material body to protest the impunity surrounding these crimes. Self-disclosure consists in making public the most painful, and even traumatic, details regarding feminicide deaths or enforced disappearance to articulate the reality of gendered structural violence at the U.S.-Mexico border and to demand that the problem is addressed politically.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> My analysis on maternal activism and the politics of visibility resonates with political scientist, Timothy Pachirat, who conducted an excellent study on industrialized killing in the slaughterhouse. In this study, Pachirat, examines how distance and concealment operate as mechanisms of power in modern society to hide the massive killing of animals for human consumption. Segregated from everybody's sight—and protected through state ordinances that criminalize unauthorized physical access to industrialized slaughterhouses with the purpose of documenting what happens inside—the slaughterhouse operates as a “zone of confinement,” where the industrialized killing of animals is rendered tolerable. “Society’s demand for cheap, steady supply of physically and morally sterile meat,” according to Pachirat, makes possible its fabrication “under socially invisible conditions.” Thus, in the final end of the production chain, people consume meat that is antiseptically packaged in cellophane wrappings which distance them from the blood, smell, and cruelty of the slaughterhouse and conceal the massive killing of animals that takes place inside the walls of these confined spaces. Following the work of historical sociologist Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process*, Pachirat further argues that things that once occurred in the open without producing reactions of disgust are increasingly sequestered from sight and segregated as part of the civilizing process. Conversely, things that reveal cruelty, immorality, or disgust to the human eye are seen as backwards and barbaric. As a result, morally and physically repugnant practices, like mass killing, are hidden from sight rather than eliminated or radically transformed. Mass killing in the slaughterhouse is one of such practices. To disclose the industrialized killing at the slaughterhouse, Pachirat proposes looking at slaughterhouse work from the standpoint of those who carry it out. This is important because this move may bring about an alternative to the effects of distance and concealment by “removing barriers to sight” in order to change inhumane practices that are invisible to the human eye. See Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, (New Haven: Ct: Yale University Press, 2011), 3-11. A similar effort is being carried out in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City, where one of the central concerns has been to make feminicide visible. The term the politics of visibility discussed in this chapter is precisely inspired by the activists' effort to make feminicide visible. Moreover, as I will explain further on, the practice of self-disclosure is used to dismantle the concealment that surrounds feminicidal violence and to gather support for the mothers' demands of justice.

<sup>41</sup> I am not claiming that all the victims' families see self-disclosure as a politically oriented act. Not all of them do. In fact, many of them would deny having any interest in politics whatsoever. What I want to articulate here is simply the families' insistence on the idea that feminicide and enforced disappearance are not conventional acts of criminality but different modalities of state violence. The state is directly implicated in these crimes not only because state agents have ties to those criminal organizations that are responsible for the violence, but also because of the lack of professional investigations, prosecutions, and

Performative practices like marches, anti-feminicide caravans, or *rastreos* (more about this later) are repertoires of protests whereby the victims' mothers and their allies engage in acts of self-disclosure to denounce the lack of political will to prevent the more killings and to investigate past crimes. In this sense I define self-disclosure as a resource in the politics of visibility that relies on the revelation of the self to dismantle the narrative of denial—a set of discourses that aim to negate that Ciudad Juárez confronts a situation of systematic discrimination against women—espoused by government officials.

What is there to be learned about the mothers of Chihuahua? Why did protestors invoke the category of the mother to protest feminicide? What makes activism in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua maternal? In what follows, I answer these questions to make the argument that maternal activism resorts to a politics of visibility that brings to light the stories of the murdered and disappeared women in their quest to know the truth of what happened to these women and girls. This politics of visibility is the driving force behind the practices of resistance observed in Ciudad Juárez—protests, marches, *rastreos*, the *funeralization* of the city, *acompañamiento*—and it works through acts of self-disclosure whereby the victims' mothers reveal the most intimate details about their private lives to communicate their struggle and use the material body to protest the crimes and demand support for their cause. In this chapter, I trace the emergence of maternal activism through the stories of Paula Flores and Marisela Escobedo, two emblematic figures of maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez, to illustrate how the politics of visibility operate on the ground.

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concrete sentences. Self-disclosure is a political instrument in the sense that its larger goal is to change the laws and systems of power that engender and sustain gender-based violence as a whole.



## Las Madres de Chihuahua: The Emergence of Maternal Activism

As Ricardo Anzaldua's poem suggests, Las Madres de Chihuahua (the mothers of Chihuahua)<sup>42</sup> is a group of women whose (hi)-story is the product of death and/or injury. The poem illustrates the agony, sorrow, and pain of the mothers after learning that their daughters were murdered in the cruelest way or went missing without leaving any apparent trace. At the same time the poem reflects the mothers' struggle "to keep the wounds open" in an attempt to preserve the memory of the acts of violence inflicted on their daughters' bodies. But how does one begin to understand the story of these mothers? The mother, most writings on maternalism seem to concur, is the paradigmatic figure of mourning.<sup>43</sup> When a mass campaign of murder, massacre, or genocide takes place, says historian Thomas Laqueur, mothers gain prominence because they take on the task of mourning and commemorating the death.<sup>44</sup> The public display of maternal pain, as Anzaldua's poem also intimates, help us see, hear, and feel the wounds of the sufferer.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, mourning mothers not only perform the vital task of retrieving the subjectivity of the victims from the horrific deaths that they suffered.<sup>46</sup> Through their own pain, they also reveal a larger critique that threatens the political stability of the state by exposing the lies, cover ups, and sheer corruption of key agencies and institutions.

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<sup>42</sup> I want to remind the reader that the state of Chihuahua is home to two different geographic localities: Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City. Maternal activism is very active in the two cities. Accordingly, the term mothers of Chihuahua denotes the existence of this modality of protest activism in both cities.

<sup>43</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, interrupted*, (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Thomas W. Laqueur, "The Dead Body and Human Rights" in *The Body*, ed. Sean T Sweeney and Ian Holder (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002);" Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning: with the essay, Of amnesty and its opposite*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Clifton R. Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature*, (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*.

<sup>44</sup> Laqueur, "The Dead Body," 75-76.

<sup>45</sup> In the poem, Anzaldua writes, "I have seen them... I have heard them... I have embraced them." Anzaldua, *Muerte Suspendida*.

<sup>46</sup> Schmidt Camacho, "Body Counts," 47

It is in this respect that the story of the mothers of Chihuahua is inextricably linked to the intensification of violence along the U.S.-Mexico border in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During these years, the number of female homicides increased in numbers previously unknown. The mothers of Chihuahua are the face of this tragedy that began in 1993 and continues until today, claiming the lives of hundreds of women in one of the most troubled border spaces in the world. How exactly did this story begin and what are its political implications? Like their Argentinian counterparts, the mothers of Chihuahua came into being in response to the disappearance or death of their daughters. Their story originated when a group of women began to call people's attention towards a phenomenon characterized by a large number of female deaths and enforced disappearances in northern Mexico. Maternal activism, however, did not begin as a coordinated effort to denounce gendered-based violence and the twisted mechanisms of power that sustain it. Rather, it started with small individual efforts undertaken by the victims' mothers, friends, and relatives to make these deaths known and to show the ordeal of the families who cried for justice.<sup>47</sup> Eventually, these individual acts gained the support of friends, artists, community members, and prominent activists who joined the struggle against femicide and the various forms of gender and sexual oppression.

The mothers of Chihuahua comprise two main groups. The mothers of "disappeared" women and girls form the first group. That is, the mothers in this group claim that their daughters' whereabouts are unknown, but they reject the claim that the missing women and girls are already dead. The majority of the mothers in this group report a similar experience. Their daughters disappeared in plain daylight on their way to work, school, or some other place, which they never reached. They were snatched in

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<sup>47</sup> Miramontes, in conversation with the author. June, 2013.

downtown Juárez, presumably while walking through Mina Street.<sup>48</sup> After learning about the girl's disappearance, the family reported the girl's absence to the corresponding authorities. Police officers, however, did not implement the corresponding search protocols to find the missing person. Rather, the mothers themselves began distributing hundreds of fliers with the girls' photographs hoping to gather useful information about their disappearance. Some of them offered money in exchange of information. Others went from place to place seeking all sorts of information about the last moments when the missing person was seen alive. In so doing, the mothers began a long struggle for truth and justice.

A second group of mothers went through a similar situation. Their daughters also disappeared on their way to work or school. The difference is, however, that this group of mothers had to confront the fact that their daughters were brutally killed days, weeks, and even months after they disappeared. The mothers began an intense search for their daughters until the dead body of the missing person finally turned up. In most of these cases, female corpses showed signs of torture, rape, and mutilation. Police officers never explained who committed the crimes and for what reason. On the contrary, their typical response was to conclude from the characteristics of the crime that the victims were doing something wrong, which in turn implied that they were guilty of their own deaths.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, "Se Concentran en Calle Mina Desapariciones de Mujeres," *El Diario*, July, 2012. In this revealing study, Rodríguez Nieto determined that in recent years at least 11 women disappeared from Mina Street, which is surrounded by bars, cantinas, and prostitution establishments. Mina Street is also the place where all public buses that serve the west side of Ciudad Juárez arrive. It has been suggested that a considerable number of the missing women reached Mina Street in one of these buses and were kidnapped somewhere around this area. All references to this article are the author's translation.

<sup>49</sup> See Wright, *Disposable Women* and Gibler, *To Die in Mexico*. Both Wright and Gibler have shown how the typical response that the Mexican government gives to murder cases is a culpability sentence. In other words, public officials have been repeatedly heard suggesting that the murdered women "*vestían provocativamente*" (dressed provocatively), *eran prostitutas* (were prostitutes), *en algo debe de haberse metido* (were up to something [wrong]).

As it happened to the first group of mothers, the police authorities showed no interest in conducting professional investigations to gather relevant information to locate the culprits. The mothers in this group engaged in public protests because they wanted to make public the stories behind the women and girls who were killed in such a terrible manner. At the same time, they wanted to expose the police authorities for failing to take the necessary steps to prevent the killings. They complained that state and local police forces left the burden of the investigations to the victims' families since poor women who are brutally killed did not seem to be a priority for state officials.<sup>50</sup>

As is probably evident by now, in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua city, the mothers not only took on the task of mourning or commemorating their dead. They were left with the responsibility of investigating the femicide crimes and enforced disappearance. Therefore, it is in this sense that maternal activism must be understood, as describing the process through which the mothers attempt to make visible the murder or disappearance of a daughter and to expose the local and state police departments for failing to respond to a mother' request to find her daughter. This form of activism is maternal not because of a sheer interest in celebrating the actual experience of mothering or because anti-femicide activists want to celebrate universal maternal values. Rather, this modality of activism is maternal because the mothers had no other choice but to seek truth and justice through their own means. It was the ordeal of confronting the authorities' refusal to help their daughters that triggered the political mobilization of the mothers since, in the eyes

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<sup>50</sup> Anti-femicide activists in all Mexico repeatedly complain that state officials are not interested in acknowledging, let alone, addressing the problem of femicide. For instance the governor of the state of Mexico, Eruviel Ávila, was quoted declaring that, "En el Estado de México hay cosas más graves que atender (we have more urgent things to address in the state of Mexico)" after a prominent organization asked for a meeting to discuss the measures that his government was taking to prevent Femicide crimes. See the news report in Anaiz Zamora Márquez, "En el Edomex "hay cosas más graves que atender" que los feminicidios: gobierno mexiquense," *Revista Proceso*. 23 de Mayo de 2014.

of the local, state, and even federal authorities, a woman who is kidnapped and faced the prospect of being raped, severely beaten, and finally killed does not seem to matter.

“Don’t look for her! Maybe she ran away with her boyfriend.”<sup>51</sup> Police officers claimed this in response to the mothers’ request to file a disappearance report. In this statement, public officials implied that the missing woman left out of her own accord in which case there was no incident to be investigated. The words also suggest that it was up to police officers to judge whether a coordinated search was needed or not. In most cases, however, these officers did not help the families. The claim that the missing women lived “a double life”<sup>52</sup> is similar in this respect. Public officials implied that the disappeared women put themselves in danger and that they were involved in illicit businesses. For this reason, they did not have the obligation to help presumed criminals and their families. Even in those rare instances when they did file the report, the objective seemed to be to get rid of the families because they rarely activated the corresponding protocol to locate a missing woman. This protocol dictates that the authorities must look for the missing person right after she has been reported to be absent. Instead, the officers told the families to go home and wait until their daughter showed up.

In response, mothers made public their own stories of pain, sorrow, and rage to expose the silence, lies, and abuses of public officials. The mothers marched on the streets, revealing their most personal stories to show how the patriarchal structures of power continue to discriminate against women. It is in this sense that maternal activism designates the actions initiated by, and on behalf of, the mothers to make femicide

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<sup>51</sup> According to Irene Miramontes, member of the organization JPNI, the police authorities continue to tell this to the families of the disappeared woman to avoid having to search for her. In conversation with the author, June 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, “Voices Without Echo: The Global Gendered Apartheid” *Emergences* 10(2000.): 138.

visible. This means that maternal activism's primary goal is not to propose a model of what motherhood is or should be. Instead, maternal activism calls our attention to the struggle of the mothers to find the missing daughters, to know who the murderers of their daughters are, and, ultimately, to find justice. How exactly does maternal activism pursue a politics of visibility? The following section addresses this question in more detail.

### **Paula Flores and The Creation of Voces Sin Eco (Voices Without Echo)**

Paula Flores, mother of Maria Sagrario Gonzalez Flores, a maquiladora worker who disappeared on April 16, 1998<sup>53</sup> is one of the early examples of mothers drawn into activism due to the loss of a daughter. Flores's ordeal began when her daughter Sagrario did not return home from her night shift at the maquiladora where she worked. At that moment, Flores's anguish began to creep in. She knew that several women had disappeared in previous years. After calling the office of the maquiladora where Sagrario worked and finding that she did not stay extra hours, Flores went to the police headquarters to file a missing person report. The officers who talked to her said that most likely Sagrario had eloped with her boyfriend. As Flores notes, the authorities would not do anything until seventy-two hours had passed. When the waiting time ended, Flores did file a disappearance report, but the police still did nothing to find Sagrario. Instead, they waited and limited themselves to ask for updates from the family.

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<sup>53</sup> Rafael Bonilla and José Ramón Pedroza, *La Carta*, IMCINE- Huapanguero Volador Films. Fall 2009. In this documentary Paula Flores narrates the story. She and her family migrated from el Salto, Durango, to Lomas de Poleo, a neighborhood located in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. In this documentary Paula describes how her daughter Maria Sagrario, was kidnapped, raped, and murdered in 1998. Paula also talks about her struggle against fear, violence, and impunity. This documentary can be found at <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/2859/La-Carta>. All references to this book are the author's translation.

Flores and the rest of the family members distributed more than 4,000 fliers with Sagrario's photograph and a telephone number to call in case any one had information about the woman's whereabouts. Support for Flores and her family came not from the local government but from the community. As she narrates, "desde que desapareció Sagrario, el patio todo el tiempo estaba lleno de gente, de toda la comunidad (when Sagrario disappeared, our backyard was always full of people, the whole community [kept coming]).<sup>54</sup> After several days, Flores was finally notified that Sagrario's dead body had been found. This moment marked a turning point for Paula Flores since her activism in favor of women's rights started after learning about Sagrario's death. As she explains:

Cuando pasaban los casos, la gente como que se quedaba así callada. Les entregaban un cuerpo y creían que allí terminaba todo. Encontraban a su hija muerta, la sepultaban y ya. Pero en el caso de nosotros, la familia [de Sagrario]... no termina. Allí empieza la lucha cuando nosotros la encontramos a ella.

(When all this was happening, people stood silent. When the families received their daughter's dead body, they thought that that this was the end of it. They found their dead daughter, buried her, and that was it. In our case [Sagrario's family], when we found Sagrario, it didn't end there. This was the beginning. This is when our struggle began, when we found her).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Paula Flores as quoted in Bonilla and Pedroza, *La Carta*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

At this moment, Flores decided to paint black crosses in lampposts to protest the negligence of the authorities. I discuss the role of spatial and material objects in the protests more extensively in chapter 6 of this dissertation, but for now, it should suffice to indicate that this practice would mark the beginning of Flores's struggle to expose the negligence of the state and local police.

Since the beginning, Flores disclosed intimate details about her life to make visible the injustice committed in Sagrario's case. As she explains in the documentary *La Carta*, "yo lo que voy a hacer es contarle a la gente, pues, ahora si que casi toda mi vida (what I am going to do is to tell everyone almost my entire life story)." <sup>56</sup> Paula Flores reveals her secrets to compel others to feel Sagrario's suffering as well as her own. In so doing, she lets go of any sense of individual privacy and becomes transparent as a crystal glass so that others can see her pain and rage towards the state institutions that failed to intervene on behalf of Sagrario. As part of her narrative, Flores recalls how she decided to move to Ciudad Juárez with her family. She was a working class woman whose husband moved to Ciudad Juárez in search of a better job. He came first. Flores and the rest of the family joined him later. Together, they started a life of hard work at the maquiladoras. Sagrario began working when she was 16 years old. Originally, she worked in a shift along with another family member, but when she turned 18, the company managers moved her to a different schedule. On the day of her disappearance, Sagrario did not take the bus that would bring her home. Flores waited for her, but soon she began to worry because she knew that many women were being killed in Juárez. Next, the family began an intense search for Sagrario. <sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



Flores explains that government officials refused to help precisely at the moment when their intervention was crucial. Originally, she recognized and accepted the authority of the institutions. This is why she went to them after suspecting that Sagrario had been kidnapped, but the officials at the police station sent her away. As part of her revelations, Flores recalls that when she painted a black cross outside the police department that dismissed her petition, a police officer accused her of being a mad woman.<sup>58</sup> State power, represented in the figure of the officer who insulted her, responded by attacking, repressing, and silencing the afflicted mother instead of assisting her. But, as Flores explains, Sagrario did not elope with a man as the police officer claimed. She was taken by force on April 26, 1998. She was “raped, tortured, killed, and buried in the desert mesa, approximately half a mile from her home in the Colonia de Anapra in Juárez.”<sup>59</sup> In the end, Sagrario’s dead body turned up in circumstances similar to many other women before her: semi buried in the desert. Another painful revelation that Flores disclosed was that she received a bag of bleached bones from the authorities, and a verbal confirmation that the bones belonged to Sagrario. Yet, no other proof that this was true was given to her.

By sharing these stories, Flores exposed the deep rage that motivated her to reach out to other families whose daughters had also disappeared to ask if she could help in the investigations. Initially Flores’s struggle was exclusively for her daughter, but the process of searching for Sagrario made her aware that other families shared the same fate. This realization triggered the creation of Voces Sin Eco (Voices without Echo) in 1998. Paula Flores, her daughter Guillermina Gonzales, and other eight families founded this

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Bejarano, "Super Madres," 135.

organization, the first group created by the mothers and relatives of women who had been killed or were disappeared. Upon learning about its creation, families in similar situations sought Voces' support to find their daughters. It was through the disclosure of their personal stories that the families realized that dozens of women had been killed in similar circumstances or went missing and that not a single case had been resolved by the authorities.”<sup>60</sup>

Voces sin Eco also inaugurated a practice called *rastreos*. These are coordinated searches throughout the desert with the purpose of finding dead bodies or any other piece of evidence linked to the crimes. Guillermina Gonzales explained that the logic behind the practice of *rastreos* was that if the missing women could not be found alive, there was a chance that these women were dead. As a result, participants in this organization set themselves to the task of searching dead bodies throughout the desert. *Rastreos* were conducted by a group of women and men who meet to inspect the desert hoping to find traces of the missing women aided with a baseball cap, a hat, and a bottle of water. With the implementation of *rastreos*, the activists retrieved a significant amount of objects, including human bones, torn clothing, shoes, and other personal objects related to the crimes. In this way, *Rastreos* made public the fact that families of the disappeared conduct their own searches due to police negligence. As Alicia Schmidt Camacho states, “[t]he *rastreo* has emerged as an instrument of social protest, a form of political theater in which the morbid search calls attention to the gross negligence of government officials.

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<sup>60</sup> Guillermina Gonzalez as quoted in Bonilla and Pedroza, *La Carta*.

By ritualizing the search for human remains, the justice movement seeks to make the material absence of the disappeared felt in the broader civil society.”<sup>61</sup>

*Rastreos* participate in the politics of visibility by serving as an instrument of social protest that allows the victims’ mothers, families, and their allies to reveal that they are alone in their struggle; namely, without the support of state agencies and institutions. Schmidt Camacho’s use of the word ‘political theater’ is key here because it shows that *rastreos* are more than a collective strategy to locate dead bodies. They are also a political performance whereby activists invite others to witness how the state harms poor women by refusing to recognize that they too have political rights and therefore abandoning them to their own fate. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have long argued that state power is also exercised through its absence. As they explain in *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, “[states] construct us out of legal precepts which sometimes endanger us by exposing us to different constellations of power so even when we are dispossessed or neglected by the state, we still remain under its sphere of influence.”<sup>62</sup> The *rastreo* is a political practice that shows how the authorities’ inaction is a form of power that puts women at risk of being killed because it sends the message that violence against poor women is never investigated let alone castigated. The very fact that the victims’ families have to implement a practice like *rastreos*—coordinated searches of dead bodies—reveals that the failure to implement

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61 Alicia Schmidt Camacho, “Ciudadana X: The Impunity of Femicidio and the Problem of Justice at the Chihuahuan-Texas Border,” Paper submitted to the Lineae Terrarum International Borders Conference For the panel: Crime and Violence on the Border: Present-Day Realities and Hoped for Solutions. March 27, 2006. 16-17.

62 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, (London: Seagull Books, 2007), 3.

urgent measures to locate the missing women exposes poor women, “to hate crimes, extreme violence, and death that is never castigated.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Marisela Escobedo: Marching for Justice**

Like Paula Flores, many other mothers engaged in political protest through the tragedy of losing a daughter. This happened to Marisela Escobedo, a mother of three who worked as a nurse in a local hospital in Ciudad Juárez. Escobedo’s life changed radically when her 16-year-old daughter, Rubí Frayre Escobedo, went missing in 2008. Like Paula Flores did before her, Escobedo reported Rubí’s disappearance to the local police, but the officers in turn did not allow the anguished mother to fill the missing person report. Escobedo kept insisting until the police finally allowed her to do it after the third attempt.<sup>64</sup> This attitude may seem outrageous, however, as Marcelo Bergman has observed women are always suspected of misbehaving and the imminent danger that they face is rarely acknowledged. “A naked woman who has been raped and brutally killed,” he says, “is somehow always suspected of wrongdoing.”<sup>65</sup> To a large degree, this is what happened in Ciudad Juárez since public officials blamed the victims themselves rather than the aggressors. In fact, they even declared that these women provoked them.<sup>66</sup> In the case of Rubí Frayre Escobedo, the police once again failed to implement a series of actions required when dealing with disappearance cases, like offering a ransom in

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<sup>63</sup> Paraphrased from Irma Campos, “Éxodo,” 1.

<sup>64</sup> Centro de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, CEDEM, “El Femicidio de Marisela Escobedo: Un Crimen de Estado.” *Internal Document* (February, 2011): 2.

<sup>65</sup> Marcelo Bergman and Szurmir M, "Gender, Citizenship, and Social Protest: The New Social Movements in Argentina." in Ileana Rodríguez, ed., *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). 396

<sup>66</sup> Gibler, *To Die in Mexico*; Vanessa Guridy, “Femicide/ Feminicide in Ciudad Juárez: A Comparative Analysis,” Paper presented for the Midwest Political Science Association Conference (April, 2011): 4.

exchange for information and requesting the distribution of fliers with the missing person photograph to see if anyone could recognize her (*pesquisas*).<sup>67</sup>

The lack of support from the police forced Escobedo to use her own resources to locate Rubí. In her quest for truth and justice, however, she had to disclose one of the most disturbing and painful episodes in her life. Escobedo revealed how her inquiries found that Sergio Rafael Barraza, Rubí's partner and father of her daughter Heiry, had been spreading rumors that he killed Rubí because he saw her with another man. The investigation also showed that Barraza took the girl's body and threw it in a swine slaughterhouse where he burned it.<sup>68</sup> Ensuing *rastreos* conducted by the family and friends found that Rubí's disfigured body was further punished since the dogs at the slaughterhouse ate whatever remained from her.<sup>69</sup> In the end, all Escobedo's family was able to retrieve from Rubí's corpse was nearly thirty tiny bones, which coincided with the woman's DNA.<sup>70</sup> Escobedo learned all these things through her own means. She even gave the police all the details about Barraza's crime in the hope that they could arrest him. These included the location of the slaughterhouse where Rubí's remains were found and Barraza's place of hiding.<sup>71</sup> Thanks to Escobedo's investigations, Barraza was captured and brought to Ciudad Juárez to face charges for Rubí's murder.<sup>72</sup>

A week before the trial began, Escobedo started a series of walks wearing a huge billboard attached to her back where people could see Barraza's picture next to the legend

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<sup>67</sup> CEDEM, "El Femicidio de Marisela," 2-3.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "De su Hija solo encontré 2 o 3 Huesos... Ahora Exige Castigo," *El Diario* April 20, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "Hallan Restos de Mujer; Arrestan a su ex Pareja," *El Diario* June 26, 2009.

<sup>72</sup> CEDEM, "El Femicidio de Marisela," 2-3.

assassin and the phrase “pena máxima (maximum penalty).”<sup>73</sup> She did this to share her story with the residents of Ciudad Juárez and to disclose the face of the man who caused so much pain to her daughter in the hope that people would join her in her demands for justice. In her walks, Escobedo was accompanied by her granddaughter—Rubí’s child, who also carried a huge sign that read, “¿donde esta mi mami? (Where is my mommy?” and “Pena Maxima (maximum penalty)”<sup>74</sup>—and by Bertha Alicia Garcia Ruiz, the mother of Brenda Berenice Castillo Garcia who disappeared in January 6, 2009. Together, the group of women walked everyday, answering questions and sharing their stories with the people who asked them.

In an interview with journalist Blanca Carmona, the news correspondent who covered Escobedo’s activism in Ciudad Juárez, the afflicted mother declared:

Yo no se como Dios me ha dado a mi la entereza para seguir luchando. Creo que es la memoria de ella y agradezco a Dios los años que me la presto. No voy a quitar el dedo del renglón porque ella merece justicia, ella merecía una vida completa, merecía criar a su hija, vivir.

I don’t know how God has given me the strength to keep struggling. I believe it is her memory and I am grateful to God because of the years he let her live with me. I will not give up the fight because she deserves justice, she deserved a full life, she deserved to raise her daughter, to live.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See figure 1 in the Appendix: Objects of Resistance.

<sup>74</sup> Carmona Orozco, “De su Hija solo encontré 2 o 3 Huesos.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

In this statement, Escobedo explains how painful it is for her to know the tragic death Rubí faced; however, she also insists that she will not cease demanding justice. For her, this meant seeing her daughter's murderer behind bars. But Escobedo, takes the act of self-disclosure one step further since, in her daily walks, she also revealed what she hopes the outcome of the trial should be: "Pena Maxima (maximum penalty)." In her eyes, Rubí deserved to live but Barraza deprived her of this right. Because of this, the man deserved to be punished with the highest sentence.<sup>76</sup> In the process of demanding justice, Escobedo invited other mothers to join her in her daily walks and to share their own stories so they too demanded justice for their daughters. For Bertha Garcia, the mother who accompanied Escobedo, the daily walks were an opportunity to send a message to other people to support the struggle for justice. They also gave her the opportunity to reach out to her daughter Brenda. As she claimed, "a mi hija, si me oye, en caso de que este por ahí que sepa que yo la sigo buscando y que la esperamos y a todas las personas que me ayuden: donde quiera que la miren que nos hablen (to my daughter, if she hears me, in case she is around, I want her to know that I keep looking and waiting for her. [The message] to the public is to help me. Wherever they see her, that they call me)."<sup>77</sup>

Like the *rastreos* discussed above, the marches are forms of self-disclosure through which the mothers expose the failure of the government to protect women and girls. Mothers like Paula Flores or Marisela Escobedo would not be protesting had the authorities showed a willingness to admit that women in Ciudad Juárez are in constant

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<sup>76</sup> Mexican laws do not allow the death penalty. The maximum penalty is 50 years in prison.

<sup>77</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "Cierran Ciclo de Caminatas con una Marcha en Silencio," *El Diario* April 27, 2010.

danger.<sup>78</sup> This is particularly interesting in the case of Marisela Escobedo because her marches show that she did not trust the judges in charge of pronouncing justice, even though she kept insisting that she did trust the law. While protesting, Escobedo asked the public to follow Barraza's trial to make sure that justice was served. As she explained, "el motivo de esta caminata es que la comunidad este al tanto de los resultados de este juicio y de si se cumplen o no las leyes (the reason for this walk is to alert the community about the results of this trial and to ask them to monitor whether or not the laws are enforced)."<sup>79</sup> In this statement, Marisela calls on the community to keep an eye on the development of the trial and the application of the law. She seemed confident that there was enough evidence to find Barraza guilty, but the fact that she kept protesting also reveals that she knew that femicide cases were rarely punished.

During the trial Escobedo commented, "Tengo fe en Dios y creo en las leyes (I have faith in God and I believe in the law)."<sup>80</sup> However, her marches showed that her confidence was limited. In the end, the outcome of the trial demonstrated that she had good reasons to mistrust the government. Despite Escobedo's marches, the judges who presided over Barraza's case found him innocent from all charges and let him free. The judges argued that Rubi's body was completely destroyed to the point that it was impossible to determine the cause of her death. They also declared that no other evidence existed against the culprit besides his own confession, but since Barraza's confession took place during a prior and unrelated detention, the judges could not use it as evidence

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<sup>78</sup> Paula Flores put this blatantly when she explained why the group of mothers choose the name Voces sin Eco for their organization. As she explains, when the girls disappear, no one hears them." Paula Flores as quoted in Bonilla, *La Carta*.

<sup>79</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "Madre arrastra simpatía de la gente con sus caminatas," *El Diario* April 23, 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "Cierran ciclo de Caminatas con una Marcha en Silencio," *El Diario* April 4, 2010.



for this trial. On top of it, the culprit had a history of lying, which made his prior confession unreliable. In sum, the prosecuting part, they argued, failed to produce concrete evidence to incriminate Barraza in Rubí's murder.<sup>81</sup> Without this evidence, they said, it was impossible to condemn him. As a result, Barraza was set free. Days after the trial conclusion, the man fled the city.

Upon hearing the verdict, Escobedo stood up from her seat in the court where the trial took place. She was holding a copy of the penal code for the state of Chihuahua, which she immediately threw to the floor. She cried and wailed with a voice that reflected all the rage at the injustice of the situation. The only words that manage to shout were, “¡No! ¿Y mi hija, Señor? ... Tanta basura y tanta impunidad (No! And my daughter, Sir?... so much dirt and so much impunity).”<sup>82</sup> Immediately after the verdict, Escobedo resumed her protests and daily marches. Again, she took to the streets to demand justice. These protests never stopped until the day when Escobedo met her own end. On the night of December 16, 2010, a gunman approached her and shot her in the head. She was standing in front of the state's Capitol where she vowed to stage a vigil until Sergio Barraza was reapprehended and put in jail. Despite being a government's zone, police officers were not present when the stranger shot her. The public camera that recorded the scene showed a gunman descending from a vehicle. He walked towards Escobedo and pointed the gun to her head. The first time the man attempted to shoot, his gun jammed

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<sup>81</sup> During his detention, Rafael Barraza not only confessed to having killed Rubí. He also showed the police the exact place where he dumped the girl's remains to avoid any possible identification. While in court, Barraza begged Marisela Escobedo for forgiveness in front of the three judges who presided over his trial, but the judges didn't consider this “enough evidence” to sentence Barraza.

<sup>82</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, “¿Y mi hija, Señor?” Grita Madre Marchista Enloquecida de Dolor: Labor ineficiente de MP no convence a nadie, absuelven a asesino de Rubí y el desorden se apodera de tribunal...” *El Diario* April 30, 2010.

and Escobedo was able to run across the street but the hit man soon caught up with her and shot a second time leaving Escobedo dead on the street.

Shortly before her murder, Escobedo received several death threats asking her to stop protesting. “I will not hide,” she said, “if they want to kill me, they will have to do it here. What is the government waiting for? Do they want him [her daughter’s murderer] to come kill me? Well, if that is the case, let him do it, but he will have to do it here in front of the governor’s office. Let’s see if government officials feel ashamed when that moment finally comes.”<sup>83</sup>

### **¡Solo me Dejaron con mi Lucha! (All I have is my struggle!)**

What is there to learn from Paula Flores, Marisela Escobedo, and the hundreds of women who are fighting for justice in Ciudad Juárez? What do their stories tell us about femicide that we cannot learn from other accounts? Maternal activism, as I mentioned above, refers to the process pursued by, and on behalf of, the mothers to make femicide visible. Its main goal is to reveal the struggle of the mothers whose daughters were killed, or went missing, to find justice for their daughters. Since the early days of activism, the victims’ mothers have pursued what I term a politics of visibility by showing residents of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and the whole world the torture, pain, and cruelty that their daughters suffered. They did it by exposing the negligence, corruption, and impunity of a justice system that abandons poor women to their own fate instead of helping them to find justice. The mothers’ use of printed fliers demanding information about the missing women, the act of painting black crosses on lampposts, the implementation of *rastreos*,

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<sup>83</sup> Escobedo’s death full story can be found at <http://www.mariselaescobedo.com/official.htm>

and the frequent marches are all different forms of pursuing a politics of visibility with a single objective: to end the government's silence and concealment regarding femicide.

Together, these practices show the shocking actions and practices that sustain gender-based violence. They invite spectators to see, and even feel, the pain and rage of the mothers by disclosing the pain suffered by their daughters. If the kidnapping of hundreds of women and girls occurred in a confined space where no one was able to see or hear what happened to them despite that these events occurred in plain daylight, the mothers' task over the years has been to force people to see and to listen a story that state officials want to deny. In this sense, the mothers' marches are subversive because they show that female vulnerability and gendered structural violence is product of persistent state corruption. These acts of self-disclosure also reveal that state institutions do not, or cannot, carry on the necessary functions that they are called to perform: protect the population, investigate structural crimes, punish recurring offences like rape, sexual harassment, or physical violence. Maternal activism shows that the Mexican state, which calls itself a democratic entity, operates through repression, intimidation, and domination in all those instances when the injured families demand help on behalf of their daughters. The presence of a mother in the streets of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua is a constant reminder that gender-based violence exists and that little is being done to address it. Marisela Escobedo expressed this point succinctly. As she declared after Barraza's absolution:

Desde ayer [viernes] retomamos esta medida para que a la gente no se le olvide, que sepa que la lucha sigue, que estén al tanto de la barbaridad que ahora

cometieron los jueces. Volvieron a asesinar a mi hija con esa decisión y este es un mensaje para ellos: con la decisión que tomaron la volvieron a asesinar, ese es mi pensamiento... Si fuera tu hija ¿que harías? (Since yesterday [Friday], we take up again this strategy [the marches], to remind the people that they should not forget. I want them to know that the struggle continues. I also want them to know the barbarity committed by the judges. With that decision, they killed my daughter a second time. This is a message for them: with your decision you killed her a second time, this is what I think... if she were your daughter, what would you do?).<sup>84</sup>

In this statement, Escobedo compares the judges' absolution of Barraza to the original act of murder. For her, the failure to punish the man is similar to the first act of violence committed against her daughter. Thus, her solution against state's violence is to keep insisting, through public protest, on the injury contained not only in the act of murder but also in the absolutory verdict pronounced by the judges. Before Barraza's trial, Escobedo initiated a series of marches to show that this man murdered Rubí and that he deserved to be punished. After the trial, she resumed the marches to show state institutions and public officials are responsible for the crimes committed against the people since they do not intervene to protect the injured. The marches raised awareness about a series of violences performed upon Rubí's body, first by the man who deprived her from her life and then by the judges who failed to convict a criminal. In point of fact, Escobedo's marches served as an indictment of the judges who handled Barraza's trial because they reveal that state

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<sup>84</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "Pedirá Familia Firmas de Apoyo en Cruceros" *El Diario* May 2, 2010.

institutions tolerate extreme violence against women. These marches found great support among Ciudad Juárez's residents who added their voices to the protests by signing a petition to reopen the case against Barraza. As a local resident expressed:

No veo tele, ni leo noticias. Pero de boca en boca me he enterado del asunto y creo que fue una injusticia. Entre los malandros, la policía, los funcionarios y el gobierno ¿que nos queda? Sólo la solidaridad entre nosotros.

I don't watch TV and I don't read the newspapers either. I have learned about this case from word of mouth and I think that it was an injustice. Between the bad guys, the police, public officials, and the government what is left for us to do? [The only thing that we have left is] solidarity among ourselves.<sup>85</sup>

As these words demonstrate, maternal activism exposes the impunity surrounding femicide crimes through acts of self-disclosure. It is also a powerful tool to denounce the structures of power that help to sustain extreme violence against women. It does this by lifting the walls that keep private matters restricted to the family circle in order to show wide open the stories of the women who were murdered. It also displays the ordeal that most of the families have endured in the process of demanding justice. It is in this way then that maternal activism must be understood to operate in Ciudad Juárez, that is, as a category that denotes the process whereby the victims' mothers pursue a politics of

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<sup>85</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "Firman Juarenses Petición de Madre Marchista VS Absolución" *El Diario* May 11, 2010.

visibility that operates through acts of self disclosure aimed at showing the painful acts of violence inflicted on women's bodies.

Maternal activism's main goal is to pursue a politics of visibility whereby the walls that remove us from structural violence are dismantled and the killing, the wounds, the pain, and the injustice are exposed. The act of tearing down that which prevents sight is nowhere best exemplified than in the marches that Marisela Escobedo performed days before she was murdered. After Barraza's trial, Escobedo began taking off her clothes so that people were able to "really" see what she was fighting for.<sup>86</sup> In the end, she marched almost completely naked, dressed only with the protest signs that she used while marching to raise awareness about Rubí's murder and to demand maximum penalty for Barraza (See figure 2 in the Appendix: Objects of Resistance). Her goal was to show the injustice committed against Rubí inscribed in her own body. As she declared:

Empezamos hoy de nuevo, con un nuevo mensaje de como me dejaron los jueces: con mi dolor en la piel, no es mensaje de exhibicionismo, me dejaron sin nada, solamente con mi lucha, de vestido mi lucha... El mensaje es que me dejaron desnuda sin garantías (We start today with a new message, of how the judges left me: only with pain under my skin. The goal is not to exhibit myself. The message is rather that the judges left me with nothing but my struggle. My dress is my struggle... The message is that they left me naked without any [political] guaranties).<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Blanca Elizabeth Carmona Orozco, "Cubre su Cuerpo Sólo con Demanda de Justicia" *El Diario* May 3, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

Escobedo's act of self-disclosure here is almost total. She removes her clothes so that people see in her body the story of Rubí, a femicide victim, and the man who took her life, Sergio Rafael Barraza. As figure 2 shows, Escobedo leads a march wearing a protest dress that she made out of the billboards she used to raise awareness about Rubí's murder. The upper part of Escobedo's dress shows Rubí's name and age when she was murdered. Below these words, we see Rubí's photograph amplified. Rubí smiles and looks straight to the camera lovingly. Her face portrays a beautiful woman full of life and happiness. Escobedo's earlier acts of disclosure informed the public that the woman in this picture was reduced to tiny bones after being killed, burned, and eaten by the dogs. Rubí's face contrasts sharply with that of her mother. Marisela Escobedo a mourning mother who covers her sorrow with sunglasses and a hat that she uses to protect herself from the sun. Below Rubí's photograph, we read the words PENA MAXIMA, the punishment that Escobedo demanded for Barraza. The back of the dress shows an amplified photograph of Barraza and the words ASESINO (assassin) followed by the words "PENA MAXIMA." Together, body and dress expose a crime that not only implicates Rubí Frayre Escobedo and Sergio Rafael Barraza, but also the state since Barraza's crime was next amplified by a judicial system that failed to convict him despite having confessed to his crime.

The judges' failure to produce a femicide sentence forced Escobedo to the streets to protest the wrong that the three judges did to Rubí. There, Escobedo found dozens of women who faced a similar story of loss and injustice. Escobedo used her body to exhibit the images and words of protests contained in her dress as she walked through the streets where thousands of women before her protested femicide, gender inequality,

poverty, and impunity. In this way, Escobedo's dress not only joins the anti-femicide protest and contestations, it becomes the protest itself that supports Escobedo's efforts to end femicide in Ciudad Juárez. As she declared the day after knowing that the three judges who presided over Barraza's trial left the man free: "Yo quisiera que la muerte de mi hija no fuera en vano, que fuera el ultimo femicidio de esta ciudad (I wish my daughter's death is not in vain, I want hers to be the last femicide in this city)." <sup>88</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Maternal activism emerged in Ciudad Juárez as a form of protest that aimed to make femicidal violence visible by making the stories of the victims and their mothers known. Unlike the government agencies that lied to conceal the crimes, the mothers used transparency, self-revelation, and disclosure so that others can see and hear their nature of their struggle. Through these acts of self-disclosure, the victims' mothers keep reminding us that femicide crimes and enforce disappearance have not been resolved. They also tell us that the authorities did not take the disappearance of women in Ciudad Juárez seriously. The mothers' call for help was not attended. Instead, the authorities claimed that the missing women were to blame for their own deaths. Coordinated searches through the desert also indicate that state agencies did not start the corresponding investigations to find the missing women and that the burden of locating the women, alive or dead, fell on the families themselves.

While this account of Paula Flores and Marisela Escobedo lays out the circumstances that defined the women's struggle against a state apparatus that ignored the

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<sup>88</sup> CEDEM, "El Femicidio de Marisela," 2.



tragic loss of their daughters, the story cannot be fixed or reduced to a single biography. The majority of the mothers whose daughters also disappeared have faced a similar experience: they had to confront the reality that justice was their own responsibility to take. Flores and Escobedo's protests are part of a series of practices that members of the mothers' movement began to perform after learning about the killings. The victims' mothers and their allies have led these protests to narrate their stories to the whole world in order to dismantle the concealment of feminicidal violence. While it is true, that feminicidal violence has not been eradicated; it is also true that women like Flores and Escobedo have managed to break the official silence that surrounds femicide in Ciudad Juárez. What are the larger political implications of these practices? I address this question in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 3

### BORN INTO A WORLD OF FREEDOM: AN ARENDTIAN RECONSIDERATION OF MATERNAL ACTIVISM IN CIUDAD JUÁREZ

“The child, this in-between to which the lovers now are related  
and which they hold in common,  
is representative of the world in that it also separates them;  
it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world.”<sup>89</sup>

Hannah Arendt

#### Introduction: Framing the Debate

“The subject of mothers” Jacquelyn Rose writes, “is thick with idealisations, one of the earliest and foremost targets of feminist critique.”<sup>90</sup> Like the subject of mothers, maternal activism has been widely discussed within feminist literature. In fact, one of the main contributions of feminist analyses on maternal activism has been to monitor how state institutions have sought to undermine the mothers’ presence in the public sphere in order

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<sup>89</sup> Hannah Arendt and Margaret Canovan, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 242.

<sup>90</sup> Jacqueline Rose, “Mothers.” Review of *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*, by Elisabeth Badinter, translated by Adriana Hunter, *Are You My Mother?*, by Alison Bechdel, *A Child of One’s Own: Parental Stories*, by Rachel Bowlby, *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, by Lauren Hackworth Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in 20th-Century England*, by Pat Thane and Tanya Evans and *I Don’t Know Why She Bothers: Guilt-Free Motherhood for Thoroughly Modern Womanhood*, by Daisy Waugh. *London Review of Books* 36 (2014): 17-22, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n12/jacqueline-rose/mothers>.

to control the threat that they pose to the polity. At the same time, feminist analyses of maternalism have also found the figure of the mother lacking for upholding traditional family values and roles despite that in Greek antiquity, there used to be a time “when becoming a mother could signal a woman’s entry into civic life... Established in her household as a mother,” Rose notes, “a woman gained new economic and affective power (she had ceased to be an object of exchange). She could fulfill her destiny only by becoming a mother, but according to one account of Greek motherhood, in doing so she became more rather than less engaged in the polity.”<sup>91</sup> Today, however, there is an increasing tendency to believe that this is no longer the case since mother’s participation in politics and public life is seen as an exception.<sup>92</sup>

Rose’s discussion about an increasing depoliticized maternalism gives us a framework to introduce the central task of this chapter: to examine the seemingly paradoxical nature of maternal activism. I undertake this task through a close examination of the umbrella organization *Mujeres de Negro*, which emerged in northern Mexico to denounce femicide after the horrific discovery of eight female corpses in Campo Algodonero in 2001. This chapter makes a novel intervention in the existing femicide literature by connecting maternal activism to Hannah Arendt’s theoretical reflections on political freedom and her brief but revealing discussion of the child in *The Human Condition*. I argue that Arendt’s concept of freedom, understood as a “the capacity to begin,” and her distinctive discussion of the child, described as “representative of the world,” offer us the possibility of reevaluating contemporary debates on maternal activism, particularly, the claim that women’s public invocation of

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

motherhood reprivatizes women's roles and experiences. Contrary to this view, I argue that Arendt's categories help us rethink the paradox of maternal activism by directing our attention to the activists' experiences of public freedom, which they inaugurate in their collective acts of protest. In making this claim, I agree with Bonnie Honig's suggestion that Arendt's theory "of a politics that is potentially activist"<sup>93</sup> calls our attention to women's capacity to act, to take an initiative, and to inform a new beginning.<sup>94</sup> I argue that those women who engage in maternal activism enact their freedom by coming together in a permanent protest campaign to demand that not one more woman is killed with impunity. In so doing, they politicize the traumatic event of death and challenge the claim that the killings are "normal events" that exist in any large city like Ciudad Juárez.

Attending to this alternative interpretation is significant since Arendt's potential contribution to the maternal activism literature has gone unnoticed. Yet, her concept of freedom and her original discussion of the child give us an interesting way to rethink this modality of protest. In offering this interpretation, my aim is not to dismiss the insight that maternal activism is undecidable given that it simultaneously challenges and reinforces the hierarchies that keep women oppressed as it is commonly suggested in the literature.<sup>95</sup> Rather, my goal is to illustrate that much more is at stake in this debate, particularly the myth that the women are unable to redefine maternalism and to wrest it from its patriarchal monopoly. To that end, it is important that we ask whether a different story is possible since, as George Ciccariello-Maher argues in a different context, "limiting our history to the crimes of the powerful would be to remain mesmerized by

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<sup>93</sup> Bonnie Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 215.

<sup>94</sup> Arendt and Canovan, *Human Condition*, 177.

<sup>95</sup> Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*; Maria del Carmen Feijoo and Marcela Maria Alejandra Nari, "Women and Democracy in Argentina," in Jaquette, ed. *Women's Movement*; Wright, *Disposable Women*.

their own governing myths.”<sup>96</sup> In a similar vein, I argue that limiting our analysis to the paradoxes that reinforce traditional prohibitions against women’s access to the public sphere is to miss the powerful acts of freedom that the women of Ciudad Juárez inaugurate by coming together in a mass movement to protest femicide publicly.

In what follows, I show that Arendt’s theory of freedom brings new insights into the study of femicide and maternal activism. In taking this path, however, I am aware that I use Arendtian categories to do what she did not do, namely, to entertain the possibility that a family identity such as motherhood can be invested with political meaning to resist gender-based violence. Even so, I am persuaded by Bonnie Honig’s argument that Arendt’s categories possess an internal logic that can be used to resist the author’s own demarcations and to expand its original theorization.<sup>97</sup> Accordingly, this chapter offers a novel interpretation of the Arendtian categories of freedom and the child to show that maternal activism is potentially radical and transformative of women’s lives and experiences.

The chapter is organized in five parts. In part one, I briefly introduce the umbrella organization, *Mujeres de Negro*, which emerged in northern Mexico to support the mothers’ protest campaign for truth and justice. Next, I discuss Arendt’s concept of freedom and the child as explained in *The Human Condition*. The central claim proposed in this section is that Arendt’s concepts illustrate that the anti-femicide protests are from the outset an exercise in political freedom. Part three introduces the Elshtain-Dietz debate on maternal thinking to illustrate how maternal activism, despite having proved to

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<sup>96</sup> George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chavez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 14.

<sup>97</sup> See Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), Chapter 4. See also Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations*, Chapter 6.

be inspiring for many women around the world, still finds powerful objections from radical feminists who continue to influence contemporary debates on this topic. As I endeavor to show, some feminist circles criticize maternal activism in Juárez for reasons similar to those found in Dietz's objections to maternal thinking. Part four discusses maternal activism in Juárez as an act of political freedom whereby biological and symbolic mothers alike assert their right to protest publicly on behalf of femicide and enforced disappearance victims. Finally, part five concludes with some reflections about the larger implications of thinking the paradox of maternal activism anew.

### **Éxodo Por la Vida: ¡Ni Una Más! (Exodus for Life: Not One more) Campaign**

As I explained in the previous chapter, maternal organizations emerged in Ciudad Juárez to make the disappearances and violent deaths of hundreds of women and girls visible.<sup>98</sup> Voces sin Eco, the organization created by Paula Flores, Guillermina Gonzales, and another eight families whose daughters had also disappeared, was pioneer in the struggle to denounce the gender-based crimes documented in Ciudad Juárez after 1993.<sup>99</sup>

Members of this group complained that local politicians downplayed and even denied

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<sup>98</sup> The exact number of female homicides and disappearances is unknown to this day given that government officials and local activists have documented very different figures. Most authors, however, report a number close to 1,500 murders and disappearances to date. See Fregoso and Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women*.

<sup>99</sup> Initially, femicide crimes were defined by two distinctive characteristics. First, the victims' dead bodies showed signs of excessive violence. According to some reports, "a significant proportion of the murders—about one third—fitted a common pattern." Young, working class women were snatched on their way to work or school and have never been seen again or were found dead, their bodies "severely tortured, sexually violated, and even mutilated by their aggressors." Second, female corpses were left to rot in the desert, abandoned lots, or residential areas where passers-by found them. Over time, however, the term femicide has been expanded to include "any modality of violence that results in the death of a woman." See Livingston, "Murder in Juárez," 59; Gutiérrez Castañeda, *Violencia Sexista*; Teresa Rodríguez, Diana Montané, and Lisa Pulitzer, eds., *The Daughters of Juárez: A True Story of Serial Murder South of the Border* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2007) and Irma Guadalupe Casas Franco, director of the organization Casa Amiga Ester Chávez Cano, A.C. In conversation with the author. July 2013.

that the city confronted a serious problem despite the fact that the number of murdered women kept growing. In addition to the frequent marches, mass protests, and permanent mobilization, members of Voces visited radio stations and local TV shows to narrate how police officers mistreated the families who sought their assistance. The suggestion that the lives of young, working-class women did not deserve a serious investigation spawned a general outrage that among independent journalists, artists, human rights defenders, as well as ordinary people who offered their solidarity with the victims' mothers.

Internal disputes and lack of financial resources led Voces sin Eco to disband in 2001, but other organization emerged to denounce femicide, including Nuestras Hijas de Rereso a Casa (Our Daughter Return Home), and Justicia para Nuestras Hijas (Justice for our Daughters) and Mujeres de Negro (more about this later). Norma Andrade and Marisela Ortiz, the mother and teacher of Lilia Alejandra García, a femicide victim, created the organization Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa in 2001. Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas was created by Norma Ledezma in 2002. Members of these organizations made it their priority to pressure government officials to investigate the cases of disappeared and murder of women. Both organizations—Nuestras Hijas and Justicia—currently assist many families who have gone through the experience of loosing a daughter or relative. For example, Justicia assists 66 families, but it has accompanied nearly 200 families since it was created.<sup>100</sup>

Maternal organizations have been central in the struggle to make femicide visible, but other organizations exist that support the victims' mothers in their quest for justice. For example El Centro de los Derechos Humanos de la Mujer, initially part of the organization Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, but now operating independently, La Red Mesa

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<sup>100</sup> Miramontes, in conversation with the author. June, 2013.

de Mujeres in Ciudad Juárez, Mujeres por Mexico in Chihuahua, or Casa Amiga in Ciudad Juárez. These organizations have worked in tandem with the victims' mothers, providing them with legal and psychological support despite that they are not maternal organizations per se. Even so, a central objective for these organizations is to accompany the mothers and families of femicide in their effort to make femicidal violence visible inside Mexico and around the world.

Historically, the majority of these organizations has worked independently from one another, however, a joint collaboration between them began after eight female corpses were found in an abandoned lot known as El Campo Algodonero in November of 2001. This event would spark the *Éxodo por La Vida: ¡Ni Una Mas!* Campaign launched in March 2002 to end the agony of women in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>101</sup> The news of Campo Algodonero brought together the entire activist community in Chihuahua City and in Ciudad Juárez because they considered that femicide cases could not be tolerated any longer. Immediately after the horrific discovery, the state police announced the detention of two men who were presumably responsible for the killings. However, evidence of torture indicated that the police officers forced them to take responsibility for the crimes.<sup>102</sup> Consequently, the organizations got together for the first time to discuss the problem of violence and impunity. Their first concerted action consisted in marching during the annual parade celebrated in November 20, 2001.<sup>103</sup> Protesters showed up dressed in black tunics, pink hats, and pink paper crosses attached to their bodies. This is how the collective *Mujeres de Negro* was born.

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<sup>101</sup> Martha Graciela Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias 1995-2006: 11 Años de Servicio* (Mujeres por Mexico en Chihuahua A.C., 2008), 55. All references to this book are the author's translation.

<sup>102</sup> Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54-55.

<sup>103</sup> Every year, on November 20<sup>th</sup> people in all over Mexico commemorates the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution with a parade ritual that takes place in every single city.



The story behind the founding of Mujeres de Negro is simple.<sup>104</sup> The black tunics they wore during their marches represented mourning. The pink hats represented youth and life since most of the murdered women were very young.<sup>105</sup> This characteristic outfit made a huge impact on the people who saw it. As one of them explains, the local press gave the November 20<sup>th</sup> protestors the name Mujeres de Negro in reference to the black tunics.<sup>106</sup> In a way, Mujeres de Negro was a clear indication that the burial practices in Mexico had been inverted. As Irma Campos explained, “Hace muchos siglos... en tiempo de Paz hijos e hijas sepultaban a sus queridos mayores; y los abuelos y abuelas—en tiempos de Guerra—lo hacían con sus hijos jóvenes. ¿Que estado es este que aparentando la paz condena a las mujeres a la... muerte? Es un estado indolente, falto de moral y responsabilidad (centuries ago... during peace time, daughters and sons buried their beloved elderly; and the grand fathers and grand mothers parents—during wartime—would do it with their younger children. What kind of state is this one, which simulates peace, but in doing so actually condemns women to death. It is a state which lacks compassion, morality, and responsibility.”<sup>107</sup> Participants in the Mujeres de Negro campaign use the black dresses to portray state leaders as inhumane, immoral, uncompassionate, and therefore accomplices with the killings.

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<sup>104</sup> Some of organizations that constitute Mujeres de Negro, include, in Chihuahua City: *El Centro de los Derechos Humanos de Las Mujeres A.C.*, *Mujeres por Mexico en Chihuahua A.C.*, *Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas A.C.*, *Red Nacional Centro de Atencion a la Mujeres A.C.* In Ciudad Juárez we find: *Centro de Derechos Humanos Paso del Norte A.C.*, *Red Mesa de Mujeres A.C.* (hosts 10 smaller organizations), *Colectiva Arte: Comunidad y Equidad A.C.*, *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, and *Casa Amiga*. It is also important to note that several victims’ mothers also work and collaborate with the women’s movement. Some of them are affiliated and receive assistance of various forms from the organizations while others work as autonomous activists within the movement.

<sup>105</sup> Isabel Encerrado, participant in the collective Mujeres de Negro. In conversation with the author. June 2013.

<sup>106</sup> Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54-55.

<sup>107</sup> Irma Campos, “Éxodo,” 1.

While not all the women who participated in the Mujeres de Negro organization were the victims' biological mothers, they supported the mothers demands that that no one more woman is killed in northern Mexico. In doing so, protesters reclaimed femicide victims as their own daughters in a gesture of solidarity with the mothers' struggle for justice.<sup>108</sup> As Isabel Encerrado explained, "el activismo maternal no fue tomado como una estrategia consiente, mas bien fue forzada en respuesta a las autoridades que acusaron a las activistas de estar en una lucha que no les correspondía. El gobierno lo que nos decía era 'a ti no te han matado o desaparecido a nadie, ¿[entonces] qué diablos estas haciendo aquí?'—[La respuesta de las activistas fue] -'Bueno es que ella también es mi hija' (maternal activism was not adopted as a conscious strategy, it was rather forced to us in response to the authorities who accused the activists of being in a struggle that it wasn't theirs. What the government use to tells us is 'you don't have a murdered or disappeared daughter, what the hell are you doing here [protesting]?—'Well' [they answered] 'she is also my daughter')."<sup>109</sup>

What makes Mujeres de Negro's embrace of maternalism significant? At one level, Mujeres de Negro are part of the broader category of maternal activism because their goals and objectives are oriented to helping the victims' mothers and families to make gender violence visible and also because their commitment to accompany the victims' mothers in their struggle for justice.<sup>110</sup> At another level, the *Éxodo por la Vida*:

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<sup>108</sup> Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54-56.

<sup>109</sup> Encerrado, In conversation with the author. June 2013.

<sup>110</sup> I am aware that there is an important distinction to be made between the victims' biological mothers and those women who protest in solidarity with the victims and their families. Certainly the level of self-disclosure and the risks faced by supporters are, oftentimes, less demanding. Here, however, I am not interested in determining what acts involve more or less risk and more or less commitment on the part of activists. My goal is rather to scrutinize self-disclosure as a means of political contestation. In this sense, supporters' participation in the protests is also an act of self-disclosure to the extent that participation in the

¡Ni Una Mas! Campaign used self-disclosure on a larger scale. Women marched in black tunics to raise awareness about femicide not only in the whole country but also around the world. Protests sought to show the climate of impunity that surrounded these crimes. As a prominent activist declared, “the institutions charged with the task of seeking justice do not work... but no body would stop our struggle to denounce them.”<sup>111</sup> This gesture is crucial because it extends the idea of self-disclosure beyond its local reach. In their marches, Mujeres de Negro displayed mourning to denounce the little concern government officials showed for the crimes and their lack of involvement in the investigations.

### **Maternal Activism as Political Freedom**

One of the first scholars to examine the anti-femicide protests is author Melissa W. Wright. In a move that resembles Joan W. Scott’s claims in her seminal book *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*,<sup>112</sup> Wright contends that the anti-femicide protesters are caught in paradoxes since women who venture out of the public sphere are deemed unfit for politics based on their seeming contamination in the

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marches, public rallies, building occupations, and so on expose activists’ commitment to resist femicidal violence.

<sup>111</sup> Irma Campos, “Éxodo,” 2, 3.

<sup>112</sup> Scott’s central claim in this book is that the history of French feminism is fraught with paradoxes. In her view, French feminists contradicted themselves by simultaneously invoking women’s equality and difference to contest their exclusion from citizenship rights. In her words, feminism’s goal “was to eliminate 'sexual difference' in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of 'woman' (who were discursively produced through 'sexual difference'). To the extent that it acted for 'women,' feminism produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept *and* to refuse 'sexual difference'—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history. See Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 3-4.

public sphere. For Wright, *Mujeres de Negro* and similar organizations illustrate feminism's paradox because:

In taking their protests to the public sphere and exercising their democratic rights as Mexican citizens, the *Mujeres de Negro* are publicly declaring the right of women to exist in the public sphere both as citizens and as people who deserve to be free from violence and fear. Yet, as they take to the streets, they are vulnerable to attacks that they are “public women” in a discursive context where that label continues to be used effectively to dismiss and devalue women for “prostituting” themselves by venturing beyond the domestic sphere, that traditional domain of female purity... *Mujeres de Negro* face the paradox that by exercising their democratic voices through public protest, they are dismissed, by their detractors, as “unfit” citizens, based on their contamination as “public women,” whose causes are equally contaminated by their public presence.<sup>113</sup>

There is a binary logic that restricts women's political involvement in Ciudad Juárez according to Wright. Such logic portrays private women—wives, mothers, and daughters—as pure and abnegate, while labeling those women who venture beyond the domestic sphere as morally contaminated and unfit for politics. But the problem for Wright is not only that such discourses produce a binary logic that defines women either as private/public, good/bad, fit/unfit, mother/citizen, and so on. The larger issue is that women are unable to redefine what it means to be a mother because they participate in a discursive context that makes it hard for women to simultaneously be a mother and a

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<sup>113</sup> Wright, *Disposable Women*, 153-154.

citizen. As she explains: “Mujeres de Negro do not have the option to declare that such assertions are “nonsense” or “ludicrous,” in an environment where this discourse is commonly used to blame women for the violence they suffer, to deny them access to public protections, and to enforce a patriarchal concept of the domestic domain as the proper place for women.”<sup>114</sup> Thus, in order to legitimize their presence in the streets, female protesters depicted themselves as women whose motivations come from their “private” interests as mothers. In doing so, maternal organizations reinforced the same binary logic they sought to contest since those who protested femicide did so “neither as aggressive youth nor as politicians,”<sup>115</sup> but as private mothers.

As I will show below, Wright’s paradox of maternal activism is premised upon the feminist tradition that sees women’s role in biological reproduction as the paradigmatic source of their subordination.<sup>116</sup> From this perspective, it seems odd that women embrace a maternal identity to contest state violence because motherhood has far too often been mobilized to reinforce patriarchal control over women. This perspective, however, fails to consider that women’s role, as mothers, can also be empowering as the example of maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez shows. Therefore, a new way to consider maternal activism that makes room for empowerment would be looking at Arendt’s concept of freedom and the child. Taking this approach is significant because it shows that the seeming incompatibility between maternal activism and women’s freedom is sometimes overstated. I argue that maternal activism in Juárez is indeed emancipatory

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 154-155.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>116</sup> On this point see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994); Maria del Carmen Feijoo and Marcela Maria Alejandra Nari, “Women and Democracy in Argentina,” in Jaquette, ed. *Women's Movement*, 121. See also Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, (New York: NY, Basic Books, 1989).

because political freedom is revealed in people's readiness to act. Arendt's concept of freedom helps us to reevaluate Wright's argument that women who engage in maternal activism are trapped in paradoxes because freedom, for Arendt, is inseparable from individuals' participation in public affairs and it is made tangible in speech and action. These two faculties, according to Arendt, ascertain our place in the world where the things we do and say are significant.<sup>117</sup>

Both in *The Human Condition* and in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* Arendt depicts freedom as a worldly experience. "With the creation of human life," she notes, "the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which... is only another way of saying that freedom was created when man was created but not before."<sup>118</sup> By claiming that freedom was created when man was created, Arendt specifies two main features that define freedom. First, only human beings are capable of experiencing freedom. The second is that freedom is a worldly experience and not an inner disposition. In other words, freedom is real to the extent that it is connected to the world and experienced in relation to others. In turn, Arendt defines the world as a man-made artifact as well as the framework of human interaction. As such, the world denotes the web of relations that take place between those who have the world in common. In Arendt's words: "to live together in the world means... that a world of things is between those who have it in common as a table is located between those who sit around it. The world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."<sup>119</sup> This quote shows that Arendt does not see the world as identical to the earth. The world, for her, is a

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<sup>117</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On revolution*, (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1963), 20-23.

<sup>118</sup> Arendt and Canovan, *Human Condition*, 177. Notice that Arendt uses the term man to refer to humanity. When possible, I will use the term human beings instead of men to avoid reinforcing masculinist language.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

man-made artifact where politics can originate and whose existence depends on human hands.

The world is central for Arendt also because freedom is a worldly experience, meaning that freedom can only emerge in the world that we share with others. More specifically, freedom denotes men's capacity to act, to initiate new things, to begin, or to set something into motion. "The appearance of freedom," says Arendt, "like the manifestation of principles coincides with the performing act... Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift of freedom—as long as they act, neither before, nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same."<sup>120</sup> This passage tells us that human beings experience freedom only when they act collectively: when they participate in public affairs and enter into the public realm in order to expose how inequality and oppression are political rather than a natural phenomena. Differently stated, freedom is experienced politically in those acts that expose inequality and domination.<sup>121</sup>

Understood in this way, the anti-femicide protests were an expression of freedom to the extent that they explained gendered structural violence not just in terms of a longstanding tradition of patriarchy, but more specifically as the product of state violence in the form of impunity. The frequent marches, mass demonstrations, and caravans that comprised the *¡Ni Una Más!* Campaign marked the emergence of a movement that contested the official version, which posited that femicide victims were themselves to blame for the violence that they suffered. In the peak of the protests, thousands of women gathered to denounce that the government's lack of intervention to stop the killings was causing a massive number of female deaths.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>121</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*.

Maternal activism can be interpreted as an example of Arendtian freedom also because of the activists' symbolic act of reclaiming femicide victims as *daughters*. To grasp the political significance of this move we need to look at Arendt's account of the child. In her equation of freedom, the child represents what Arendt calls *natality*, which simply refers to the condition of being born into the world. Yet, *natality* also represents a second kind of birth, which is manifested in the human capacity to act, to begin, or to bring forth the new. In this sense, *natality* can be understood as an interruption that is produced through human action. The principles of freedom and natality are manifested in the child because, as a newcomer, the child has the capacity of beginning: acting politically. Arendt explains this as follows: "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting."<sup>122</sup> It could be argued that the capacity of freedom pertains to the child and not to the mother. How then is this capacity of freedom related to the mother and maternal activism? This occurs in two ways. First, as the explanation above indicates, the mother is an acting being who experiences freedom when she joins others to protest femicide. Thus, the mother is a beginner in that she initiates new things through political action.

The second possibility is found in Arendt's discussion of the child, not as the condition of being born into the world, but as love's product. The child, Arendt says towards the end of the chapter on action in *The Human Condition*, is representative of the world insofar as it is the "in-between to which the lovers now are related and which they hold in common."<sup>123</sup> For Arendt romantic love is worldless because the passionate fusion

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<sup>122</sup> Arendt and Canovan, *Human Condition*, 8-9.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 242.



of two destroys the in-between space that is necessary for men to relate to and to separate from one another.<sup>124</sup> Put differently, passionate love is unworldly because it creates a situation whereby the lovers seek to be secluded from the world; it triggers their withdrawal from the world, the space in which human beings can experience political freedom. Thus, because of its unworldly nature, love is not only apolitical, but perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces. In fact, the incompatibility of love and politics is such for Arendt that she even suggests that the inherent worldlessness of love “can only falsify it or pervert it when used for political purposes.”<sup>125</sup> Yet, the wordlessness that Arendt ascribes to love is resurrected through the figure of the child. As she explains:

Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others. As long as its spell lasts, the only in-between which can insert itself between two lovers is the child, love’s own product. The child, this in-between to which the lovers are now related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world. Through the child, it is as though the lovers *return* to the world from which their love had expelled them.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> For an interpretation close to mine see Svetlana Boym, "From Love to Worldliness: Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger," *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 55 (2011): 106-128. My argument is different in that I see in the figure of the child a possibility to reconnect the lovers to the world whereas for Boym this possibility opens up through passionate thinking, difference, and public imagination. See page 106. See also Robyn Marasco, "I would rather wait for you than believe that you are not coming at all": Revolutionary love in a post-revolutionary time," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36 (June 2010): 648. Marasco criticizes the apolitical dimension Arendt attributes to love, but she fails to see that she reconnects the lovers back to the political world through her discussion of the child.

<sup>125</sup> Arendt and Canovan, *Human Condition*, 52.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 242, emphasis added.

If love is that force that brings about a stark alienation because it produces the couple's seclusion from the world, from freedom, and from politics, the child recovers them for freedom, politics, and the world by reestablishing the in-between space that the lovers lost as a result of their being in love. Here, Arendt speaks of romantic love and the passionate lovers to discuss freedom as interruption. In her story, the child is representative of the world in its ability to join and separate the lovers. Yet, instead of limiting her discussion of the child to the passionate lovers, Arendt connects the story back to the world thereby suggesting that the child also represents the possibility of interrupting the lovers' detachment from politics. "Through the child," she says, "it is as though the lovers *return* to the world from which their love had expelled them."<sup>127</sup> These words suggest that, for Arendt, the child is not an ordinary member of the family unit but a newcomer that embodies the ontological fact of *natality*. Through the child, the loves regain the worldliness that is the foundation of political freedom because the child interrupts the lovers' withdrawal from the world.

While conventionally understood as kinship, the child, in Arendt's rendering, becomes an expression of freedom. Understood in this way, maternal activism does not seem to be at odds with politics and the public realm because the mothers' connection to their (missing/murdered) daughters interrupted years of passivity and detachment from politics and opened the possibility for women to act politically. With this interpretation in mind, it is possible to rethink maternal activism in Juárez. However, before proceeding, a necessary detour is in place since we need to see how the mother-child relationship has been depicted in some feminist circles.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

## **Feminist Theory and The Problem with Maternal Thinking**

Few works of feminist research have been dedicated to the study of maternal organizations in Ciudad Juárez. This, however, has not been the case in the case of maternal organizations in many other places around the world.<sup>128</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address the extensive literature on this topic, in what follows I discuss some feminist attempts to diagnose maternal activism's most pressing predicaments. I begin with the Elshtain-Dietz debate on maternal thinking to lay the groundwork that informs my own departure from, and alternative reading of, Wright's paradox of maternal activism. This debate is informative because it offers some of the main arguments for and against maternal activism. Wright's own rendering of the *Mujeres de Negro* of northern Mexico displays the core premises involved in this debate, which is why it is important to address it.

One important trend in feminist literature has been to portray maternal activism as the archetype of a universal ethics of care and love. In the sexual division of labor, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan states, mourning is a task universally given to women.<sup>129</sup> Thus, when a mass campaign of murder, massacre, or genocide takes place, maternal organizations gain prominence because they take on the task of establishing that dead bodies belonged to someone who had a specific name, story, identity, family, and community.<sup>130</sup> Maternal organizations have been the guardians of the memory of the

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<sup>128</sup> Fernando J. Bosco, "Mother-Activism and the Geographic Conundrum of Social Movements," *Urban Geography* 28 (2007): 426-431; Bejarano, "Super Madres;" Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!;" Fregoso and Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women*; Schmidt Camacho, "Ciudadana X," and "Body Counts;" Staudt, *Violence and Activism*; Wright, *Disposable Women* and "The 2010 Antipode Rgs-Ibg Lecture." See also references in footnote 6.

<sup>129</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "From Antagonism to Agonism: Shifting Paradigms of Women's Opposition to the State," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30 (2010): 164-178.

<sup>130</sup> Laqueur, "The Dead Body," 86-87.

deceased. However, the adoption of maternalism is oftentimes seen problematic within some feminist circles because childbearing has been the basis to relegate women to the domestic sphere and to ban them from politics, even though it has long been established that mothering is experienced contextually.<sup>131</sup> Thus, from the perspective of some feminists, collective mourning as a political gesture undertaken through the figure of the mother is problematic because women's role as mothers has been as the chief source of their subordination. But while the association between mothering and women's subordination is not without support, is it always the case that maternal activism is perpetually destined to repeat feminism's paradox? Should we not try to understand what else happens when women deploy the mother identity to protest violence?

Many scholars have turned to the Argentinean Madres de la Plaza de Mayo to examine the relationship between maternalism and politics. Since 1985, Las Madres began a persistent campaign to demand the return of the disappeared in the Dirty War. As a result, their activism became widely noticed by scholars in many disciplines. Jean B. Elshtain, for instance, found in The Mothers support for a feminism whose contribution to politics is elicited from women's experiences as mothers. Elshtain praised the Mothers for confronting the Argentinean army to demand an accounting of the disappeared. In her article *The Mothers of the Disappeared*, she proposed a social feminism that celebrated traditional family values posited against the state. Here, she sought to rethink the *madre dolorosa* (suffering mother) frame that scholars of this movement adopted to show the loss and pain that the Mothers experienced during the Dirty War, freezing them "in a

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<sup>131</sup> Glenn, et al., *Mothering*, 22.

posture of permanent grief.”<sup>132</sup> Yet, the *madre dolorosa* frame was limiting for Elshtain because it defined the Mothers mainly by their loss while the Mothers did much more than suffer. They challenged the dictatorship of the Military Junta at a time when asking questions about the disappeared meant risking being labeled an enemy of the state and killed.

Elshtain suggested that in order to grasp the significance of the Mothers’ activism one needed to ask not what the Mothers meant to the political environment in Argentina. A more relevant question for her was how political scientists could better understand this movement. In her view, existing political science studies failed to see that the Mothers built a collective movement by “creat[ing] a ‘we’ [that] forged a group political identity on the basis of their shared experience. Condemned to silence, they repudiated the sentence of the regime, took to the plaza, and voiced their grief and outrage... The Mothers took to the streets and created a space for anti-repressive politics.”<sup>133</sup> Elshtain’s study showed that the Mothers’ activism helped to bring about the fall of the dictatorship in Argentina, but she nonetheless concluded that their power came from family ties that offered useful resources for democratic politics. The Mothers questioned the political excesses of the Military Junta and denounced the disappearances of thousands of dissidents, yet their challenge came from the ethical stance of a caring maternity preoccupied with “moral protest and democracy.”<sup>134</sup> By arguing this, Bonnie Honig notes, Elshtain reframed the Mothers as a movement whose ethics of lamentation might

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<sup>132</sup>Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Mothers of the Disappeared: Passion and Protest in Maternal Action" in *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mohrer Kaplan (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 139. While Elshtain offers a positive account of maternal activism, I am not endorsing her model of social feminism. My aim is rather to rethink maternal activism along the lines of Arendt’s categories.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

be politically salient, but the movement itself was not primarily political. In fact, from the standpoint of radical feminism, it seemed strikingly apolitical.<sup>135</sup>

One of the most powerful challengers of Elshtain's argument is Mary G. Dietz. She interrogates Elshtain's model of maternal thinking based on the notion that it distorts "the meaning of politics and political action largely by reinforcing a one-dimensional view of women as creatures of the family."<sup>136</sup> According to Dietz, Elshtain's goal is to reprivatize feminism through the Mothers, a move that is highly problematic because it fails to take into account differences among women. In Dietz's view, maternal thinking is far from promoting the kind of democratic politics that Elshtain wants to suggest not only because it prioritizes the identity of "women-as-mothers," but also because it seeks to establish "the moral supremacy of the family over politics."<sup>137</sup> Dietz's objections to Elshtain are based on practical and political reasons. First, women have plural identities and mothering is one of them, but not the most important one. Second, maternal thinking is unclear as to what constitutes a family or who belongs to one. Third, Elshtain assumes the universality of the family without considering problems of inequality, domestic violence, or the sexual division of labor. Finally, maternal thinking reinforces the abstract division between the public and the private sphere.<sup>138</sup>

Contra Elshtain, Dietz argues that politics is the activity that gives human beings the opportunity to relate to one another in conditions of equality such that they determine decisions of common concern. Citizenship and respect for the laws, she adds, are two

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<sup>135</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38-39; See also Mary G. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," *Political Theory* 13 (February 1985): 19-37.

<sup>136</sup> Dietz, "Citizenship," 20.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 23-24.

powerful weapons against the corruption of government. In making this claim, Dietz contends that what matters to her is the development of a political consciousness among feminists in contradistinction to a maternal one. Maternal virtues, she says, can never be political because “they are connected to and emerge out of an activity that is specially, distinctive unlike... the activity of citizenship.”<sup>139</sup> For Dietz citizenship, not maternity, gives women the power to determine the direction of their own lives. Consequently, women should be interested in exercising their citizenship rights since whatever happens in the private realm is affected by politics. For Dietz, maternity is not a precondition for citizenship. Good mothers can also be good citizens, but the relationship is not one of direct causality. In other words, good mothers do not automatically make good citizens.

Going from the idea that politics is undertaken in conditions of equality, it is important for Dietz that the relationship between mother and child is not used as a basis for politics because it is inherently unequal. The child, Dietz notes, is subordinated to the mother and it depends on her. Besides, the mother-child relation is singular because the mother experiences a child as an extension of herself. The experience of citizenship is collective, inclusive, and generalized. In contrast, the mother-child relationship is personal, intimate, and unequal. In the end, Dietz concludes, maternal thinking can never democratize public power since “women who do not venture beyond the family or participate in practices beyond mothering cannot attain an adequate understanding of the way politics determines their own lives. Nor can they—as mothers or creatures of the family—help transform a politics that stands in conflict with maternal values.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

Dietz's critique offers powerful insights. However, her argument shows some of the same problems that she attributes to Elshtain. That is to say, Dietz depicts maternal values in a way that they seem undemocratic, fixed, and unchanging. Motherhood, in Dietz's rendering, is traditional, conservative, and subordinated, whereas citizenship is always already collective, inclusive, and democratizing.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, the difficult position that mothers have hitherto faced within the family makes them unfit for citizenship *qua* mothers. Here, Dietz's formulation remains structured by the assumption that maternal thinking and democratic politics are essentially incompatible: "we look in the wrong place," she says, "for a model of democratic citizenship if we look to the family... in the end all that women as mothers can do is to chasten arrogant public power, they cannot democratize it."<sup>142</sup> Dietz's interpretation is problematic insofar as she offers no alternative for women who seek freedom as mothers. For them, Dietz's only suggestion is to stop thinking as mothers and to act as citizens since one sphere of activity cancels the other.

Wright is more open to the possibility that maternal activism offers political possibilities as well as limitations for women even though she shows preoccupations similar to those we find in Dietz's critique of Elshtain. For instance, she notes that *Mujeres de Negro* and similar organizations take to the streets neither as aggressive youth nor as politicians, but as women whose legitimacy comes from the private sphere despite the fact that some of them actually work as professional politicians. This strategy, she

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<sup>141</sup> It is rather strange that Dietz fails to consider the historical struggles undertaken by those who fall outside the category of full citizenship. The obvious example is the Civil Rights Movement, but also the mass protests organized by undocumented workers in recent years. For an excellent exploration of the latter, see Cristina Beltrán, *The Trouble With Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*, (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>142</sup> Dietz, "Citizenship," 32.



claims, allows activists to do several things. First, they counter official discourses that accuse anti-femicide protesters of causing social unrest. Second, they “define the victims as fundamentally ‘family girls,’ or ‘daughters’ (‘hijas’),”<sup>143</sup> in order to challenge the claim that they were socially and morally contaminated. But even though Wright recognizes that *Mujeres* articulate a powerful challenge to the governing elites in the name of social justice, she also insists that invoking an identity that sustains the dichotomy between the public/private woman is counterproductive because it is mobilized by the government to reinforce the hierarchies that deny women access to the public sphere. What is more, with this strategy women portray their own apolitical status. As she notes:

...the woman-in-black activist is paradoxical since she ‘signifies powerlessness’ while simultaneously posing a powerful challenge to governing elites, in the name of social justice. For their rage is born of sorrow, grief, a mother’s worry, and beneath their black capes and pink hats, we expect to find soft, feminine bodies—no weapons, no muscles, no phallus. Theirs is a politics of emasculation.<sup>144</sup>

Here we see how Wright reads the paradox of maternal activism negatively. She treats protestors’ peaceful marches as a sign of support for traditional femininity and while she acknowledges that maternal organizations challenge government elites, she does not recognize motherhood as being emancipatory, let alone empowering. In fact, the performance of maternity is her reason for claiming that *Mujeres de Negro* is paradoxical. Maternalism raises larger issues for Wright. For example, the fact that not all the victims

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<sup>143</sup> Wright, *Disposable Women*, 157-158.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

surface as “daughters” in the anti-femicide campaign, which further exacerbates gender-based violence since it allows the government to ignore the severity of femicide in general. In her view, “those victims who do not emerge as daughters disappear from public discourse concerning the crimes.”<sup>145</sup> Moreover, the victim-daughter discourse reproduces the myth that the family is the heaven of women’s honor and safety despite that a great deal of gender-based violence occurs within the family.

While these are important criticisms, the problem is that they fail to imagine maternalism as an emancipatory or empowering force, especially in those cases when no family ties exist between activists and femicide victims. For Wright, women’s public deployment of maternalism is negatively paradoxical despite that the protests themselves are a clear indication that women refused to mourn passively. Decades of feminist scholarship have revealed the deep inequalities that exist within the family, therefore any attempt to deploy maternalism publicly is regarded with suspicion, and rightly so. However, my point is also that the automatic association of maternal activism with the passive role of women within the family overlooks the fact that maternalism can be redefined by investing it with political meaning. To understand how this is possible we need to move away from feminist frameworks that equate maternalism with women’s subordination. As the Juárez case shows, maternal activism was political from the outset since self-portrayed mothers took the initiative to mobilize themselves to challenge the institutions that systematically discriminate against poor women and to demand that they have better opportunities. To that end, it is important that we discuss maternal activism without automatically conflating it with or reducing it to the realm of the family.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 166.

Arendt's own reflections on freedom show that it is possible to discuss a seemingly familiar term outside of its traditional association. Her discussion of freedom, as a worldly reality that gives human beings the capacity to act, is indebted to the language of religion and its metaphors. In fact, she uses the word "miracle" to describe freedom as "a character of human existence in the world."<sup>146</sup> But while Arendt contends that freedom is comparable to the religious metaphor of miracle, she also insists that human beings, not God, perform miracles. In a move similar to Arendt's, I insist that maternal activism should be examined outside of its automatic association with women's passive role within the family to open up the possibility of finding new meaning. Arendt's theorization of freedom and her discussion of the child in *The Human Condition* give us that possibility. With this idea in mind, we can now return to the discussion deferred earlier to read maternal activism in Juárez in parallel with Arendt's concepts.

### **Mujeres de Negro, Maternal Organizations, and Arendtian Freedom**

... Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli's concept of virtue, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of *fortuna*. Its meaning is best rendered by "virtuosity," that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making) where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity and becomes independent of it.

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<sup>146</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 165.

Arendt's analysis of politics as agonistic and performative,<sup>147</sup> and her focus on freedom, helps us to reevaluate maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. Women's organizations have long profited from the symbolism of the mother, a role that, as Diana Taylor put it, "offer[s] women a certain legitimacy and authority in a society that values mothers almost to the exclusion of all other women."<sup>148</sup> Yet, as we saw earlier, maternal organizations also occupy a difficult position in the literature because the government has so often mobilized maternalism to reinforce patriarchal legal, political, and social practices as some feminists have pointed out. Yet, the claim that maternalism is mainly about women's subordination must be revised in order to open this category to a different interpretation that may also reveal its emancipatory effects for women. We can begin to do this by recognizing that maternal activism is collective, inclusive, and empowering, for this is precisely what some feminists fail to acknowledge. Two main features of maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua demonstrate this. First, maternal activism suggests that a biological and symbolic relation is at once maintained with the missing/murdered daughters. Second, maternal activism is plural since the mother identity does not exist in isolation.

In the first instance, maternal activism is inclusive because women from all backgrounds in Juárez and Chihuahua united with the victims' mothers to make gender-based violence visible, to protest feminicide, and to demand justice. *Mujeres de Negro* came into being precisely when women from all backgrounds and trajectories joined the

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<sup>147</sup> Honig, *Political Theory and Feminist Interpretations*.

<sup>148</sup> Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 195. See also Feijoo and Nari, "Women and Democracy," 113.

victims' mothers to demand institutional programs to prevent femicide and to investigate prior acts of murder and gender-based violence. In doing so, protesters stepped outside their traditional roles to bring into the open the victims' stories otherwise negated by the government's argument that the killings were "normal crimes, which also occur in other Mexican states."<sup>149</sup> This illustrates that the maternal identity that *Mujeres de Negro* endorse is inseparable from the organization's activist involvement. It is true that the mothers and sisters of the victims often led the protests. Nevertheless, everyone who wished to could and did participate, as a member of this organization declared. In her view, "*Mujeres de Negro* was created to show solidarity with femicide victims and their families and to protest the killings."<sup>150</sup>

In the second instance, maternal activism has a plural and collective dimension even when women protest as mothers because maternalism is never purely and ideally only that. Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the Platonic concept of the Idea can help us to illustrate what is at stake here. As they explain: "the Platonic concept of the Idea, *first...* it is that which objectively possesses a pure quality, or which is not something other than what it is... there is an Idea of mother if there is a mother who is not something other than a mother (who would not have been a daughter)."<sup>151</sup> What I want to illustrate here is that maternalism is far from being an instance of the Platonic Idea because mothers do not exist in a world that they only share with their sons or daughters, but in

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<sup>149</sup> Chávez Cano et al., *Construyendo Caminos*, 88.

<sup>150</sup> Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54-61.

<sup>151</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Translator Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 29-30.

one that they share with others. This point is compatible with Arendt's principle of plurality which states that "not Man, but men live on the earth and inhabit the world."<sup>152</sup>

Because mothers share the world with others, their identity is formed in relation to those others according to Arendt. More specifically, identity is formed in public action. As she explains: "[i]n acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world... This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is... is implicit in everything somebody says and does."<sup>153</sup> Arendt's point is that people's identity is revealed through public action. Yet, this revelatory quality only "comes to the fore when people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness."<sup>154</sup> These words suggest that identity is a relational construct that is formed in reference to others. Thus, since mothers live in a world that they share with others, their identities are constantly (re)produced in relation to them. To that end, Arendt's principle of plurality makes it impossible for mothers, biological and otherwise, to possess a pure quality of mothering since they are constantly interacting with others. Thus, when self-portrayed mothers come together to protest femicide they are at the same time political beings notwithstanding that they protest as mothers, for they are never purely that.<sup>155</sup>

Moreover, when symbolic mothers join the actual mothers in public protest, they are also suggesting that mothering is not an individual task that women carry out on their

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<sup>152</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 143.

<sup>153</sup> Arendt and Canovan, *Human Condition*, 179.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>155</sup> This point finds support in Arendt's discussion of economic man of whom she says: "the simple fact that Adam Smith needed an "invisible hand" to guide economic dealings on the exchange market shows that ... "economic man," when he makes his appearance on the market, is an acting being." Arendt, *Human Condition*, 185.

own, but a collective practice. Maternal organizations redefine the meaning of motherhood because all women, even when they were not the victims' biological mothers, reclaimed them as daughters; thereby implying that mothering involves biological and symbolic mothers alike. While radical feminists may contend that this move is conservative since it validates women's reproductive roles,<sup>156</sup> I argue that the gesture is more political than conservative since the act of claiming the victims as daughters produces a symbolic bond that allows all activists to assert the right to protest on their behalf. Thus, what could have been a private loss that concerned the victims' families alone actually became a national struggle of global proportions to "let the people of the world know about the killings."<sup>157</sup>

Collective action also transformed women's forms of participation and self-expression. Paula Flores explained this as follows, "We lost our fear of authorities... We used to sit for three hours before they would talk to us. Now we walk into the investigators' office as if it were our home."<sup>158</sup> This quote shows that together, women come to understand that they have rights. This situation empowers them and moves them to seek common solutions to their problems. Before their public protests, marches, and performances in black tunics and pink hats, women were regarded as "silent' citizens expected to remain passive about larger political issues."<sup>159</sup> Women's full participation in national matters was discursively solicited but neither really desired nor encouraged. Yet, as Arendt reminds us, engagement in political action can be life changing. By confronting

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<sup>156</sup> On this point, see Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive," 115.

<sup>157</sup> Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54-56.

<sup>158</sup> Paula Flores as quoted in Verónica Espinosa, "Mujeres de Negro Contra la Violencia de Género," *La Neta Noticias*, November 20, 2009.

[http://laneta.apc.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=695:mujeres-de-negro-contra-la-violencia-de-genero&catid=64:noticias&Itemid=55](http://laneta.apc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=695:mujeres-de-negro-contra-la-violencia-de-genero&catid=64:noticias&Itemid=55). Author's translation.

<sup>159</sup> Bejarano, "Super Madres," 131.

a political system that denied femicide, maternal organizations changed passivity, silence, and seclusion for active participation and public involvement.

The organizations also changed the official version of the killings by going to radio shows and televised news to narrate how police officers destroyed, covered up, and mishandled important information to delay any negative publicity for the city. As activist Hilda de la Vega explained, “the government wants to deny this, it wants to close its eyes to the facts, but... we found that two more women were murdered in Ciudad Juárez and another two in Chihuahua. We haven’t been able to stop the killings, but we keep raising our voices [to denounce them].”<sup>160</sup>

Using Arendtian concepts as a guide, we can explore further how the figure of the child illustrates that maternal activism is indeed conducive to public freedom. As we saw previously, Arendt claims that romantic love is an antipolitical force. As she notes, romantic love “produces the ‘great lovers’ whose love cannot be disturbed by the specific qualities of their sweethearts, whose feelings can no longer be rubbed raw by any contact with actuality.”<sup>161</sup> Arendt’s point is that love prompts the lovers’ isolation in a way that it detaches them from the human world. Yet, as I mentioned above, love’s antipolitical tendencies are rectified through the figure of the child. As she explains, “[t]hrough the child is as though the lovers return to the world from which their love had expelled them.”<sup>162</sup> Like the lovers in Arendt’s story, the mothers in Ciudad Juárez were detached from the world of politics before they were forced to confront the overwhelming violence that took the lives of hundreds of women and girls. Indeed, few anti-femicide activists

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<sup>160</sup> Hilda de la Vega, as quoted in Espinosa, “Mujeres de Negro.”

<sup>161</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 9.

<sup>162</sup> Arendt and Canovan, *Human Condition*, 242.



were professionally involved in politics. Yet, the killings called for a response that moved most women out of passivity and detachment from politics into political action. In this way, maternal organizations became politically engaged by creating a movement that for the first time in Mexican history put gender-based violence on the government agenda at the national level.

The disappearance and/or murder of the daughters interrupted women's detachment from politics and forced them to join together in a powerful movement to protest femicide and to demand professional investigations to prosecute those who are responsible for the crimes rather than remaining passive spectators. Like the child in Arendt's passage, the daughters in Ciudad Juárez, or more precisely, their disappearance and subsequent murder, prompted the mothers' political involvement through the *¡Ni Una Más!* Campaign. Tragic as it was, femicide called for a response beyond mere maternal mourning and grief. This response opened up spaces of freedom in order to demand a more responsible judicial system that is able to stop discriminatory practices that deny poor women equal access to justice.

Here, the parallels that exist between Arendt's discussion of the child and maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez become clearer, for the injury performed in the daughters' bodies, and the government's disregard of that injury, interrupted the mothers' detachment from politics. This shows that maternal activism, as a political practice, exceeds the practice of mothering. In the Juárez context, when the daughters went missing or were killed, the mothers formed alliances with other women, as well as men, to condemn the violence. We can infer from this discussion that the daughter does not merely make a mother of the woman that is related to her, it also makes of that woman a

potential acting being. Thus, when all women, even if they are not the victims' biological mothers, reclaim them as daughters, they are not merely validating traditional family identities and roles in the public sphere. More importantly, they are asserting their capacity to act publicly on behalf of the victims' right to have justice. They are publicly assuming the right to protest the crimes that attempt against women's lives.

But while Arendtian categories can help us to reevaluate maternal activism, scholars on this debate have largely disregarded her work for political insight. Perhaps one of the reasons why scholars interested in this debate do not turn to Arendt has to do with an apparent tension they find in her work. I am referring to her (in)famous distinction between the private and the public sphere.<sup>163</sup> To be sure, Arendt's theorization of the private and public spheres of activity seems to put scholars in the difficult position of having to reject her theories on the grounds that she denigrated "nonpolitical activities, and in particular, labor,"<sup>164</sup> the activity where she places all those things concerned with the life process. Arendt's argument can be briefly summarized as follows. In the ancient city-state, men received a second life besides their private one. This meant that within the Greek *polis* citizens belonged to two different orders of existence, namely, their own and the one they had in common with fellow citizens. The private realm was the space designed for biological and material needs, while the public realm was that space reserved for greatness and transcendence. In the private realm, necessity, not freedom, dictated individuals' existence. Yet, necessity, for Arendt, "is primarily a prepolitical

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<sup>163</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>164</sup> Martin Levin, "On Animal Laborans and Homo Politicus in Hannah Arendt: A Note," *Political Theory* 7 (1979): 521.

phenomenon characteristic of the private household organization.”<sup>165</sup> The private realm and its emphasis on biological needs is a realm of invisibility, according to Arendt, and it seems that motherhood, understood as biological reproduction, is tied to the life process, to the private realm, to necessity, and to labor —“the most natural and least worldly of man’s activities.”<sup>166</sup>

Viewed in these terms motherhood is a prepolitical occurrence and it does not belong to the public realm. Action, in contrast, is driven by freedom rather than necessity, violence, or domination. Unlike labor that houses biological needs, action seeks transcendence and durability. Arendt’s theorization of labor and action as two competing activities makes it seem that she would reject any effort to invest motherhood with political meaning. However, as my discussion of freedom and the child demonstrates, maternal activism is not about celebrating traditional family identities and roles in the public sphere; it is also about opening up spaces of freedom to asserting women’s capacity to act publicly to end femicide.

### **Conclusion: Maternal activism Reconsidered**

I started this chapter by discussing Wright’s paradox of maternal activism. This paradox suggest that maternal organizations have successfully challenged the Mexican government to take action against femicidal violence while also reinforcing the traditional hierarchies that ban women from the sphere of politics given that they protest as mothers and reclaim the victims as their daughters. Yet, as I hope to have shown

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<sup>165</sup> Arendt and Canovan, *Human Condition*, 31.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

throughout this chapter, Wright's paradox only makes sense if we automatically assume that maternal activism is mainly about defending the family, an institution oftentimes mobilized by the state to serve patriarchal social and political practices. As a result, Wright suggests that maternal organizations:

...do not strictly represent resisters to power. They also reinforce certain hierarchies, based upon very familiar modes of exploitation. Again to invoke Joan Scott, the *Mujeres de Negro* illustrates how feminist politics has only paradoxes to offer since the productive effects of their contradictory positioning are not contained within a single dialectical continuity. For, by binding their legitimacy as social activists to their private concern as women and as mothers, rather than as politicians, feminists, or human rights activists, they create the dialectic by which a private woman has more legitimacy in the public sphere than a self avowed public one.

Wright's argument implies that maternal activism is bound to be (negatively) paradoxical, when associated with traditional conceptions of the family as an institution that perpetuates women's oppression. But the argument that maternal organizations have only paradoxes to offer follows from protesters' public endorsement of motherhood. This leads some to suggest that a more radical stance against femicide requires that protesters abandon this category altogether, perhaps, in favor of a more radical one since resistance seems counterproductive when carried out by mothers. However, if the endorsement of a maternal identity leads scholars to worry about the possibility that traditional family roles can be normalized, we also have to consider what else we miss by

separating women's adopted identity as mothers from their protests. After reading maternal activism along Arendt's categories the answer becomes clear: maternal activism is also conducive to and compatible with the experience of freedom.

Arendt's categories of freedom and the child direct our attention to the fact that the mother is also an acting being. Thus, even if the association of maternal activism and the family cannot be completely disavowed, it is important that we broaden our field of vision beyond the family to consider that maternal activism can be an expression of political freedom from its inception. As we have seen, collective action allowed maternal organizations to rewrite the story of femicide. To the argument that the number of victims was being inflated, maternal organizations responded with the *¡Ni Una Más!* Campaign. To the government's attempt to shame the victims by raising doubts about their morality, the organizations responded by denouncing the government for downplaying the murders and disappearances of hundreds of women and girls. To the government's attempt to fabricate culprits to appease protesters, women's organizations responded by siding with the accused to denounce the Mexican government for torturing detainees into confession.<sup>167</sup>

The picture that emerges from this alternative account of maternal activism is significantly different given that existing scholarship doubts the compatibility between motherhood and freedom since it assumes that motherhood is unequal, singular, and fixed. However, as I have shown in this chapter, this is rarely the case. In fact, maternal activism can also be collective, inclusive, and empowering as the example in Ciudad Juárez shows. Some scholars might object to my interpretation of maternal activism on the grounds that Arendt's theory of political action excluded certain groups from the

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<sup>167</sup> Rodríguez et al., *The Daughters of Juárez*, 29.

space of appearance: women, slaves, barbarians, and presumably, mothers.<sup>168</sup> Yet, as I have suggested in this chapter the space of appearance is constituted by collective action. Furthermore, I am persuaded by Honig's argument that Arendt's main objection against the private sphere was that certain human activities engender particular mentalities that hinder or destroy political action.<sup>169</sup> For Honig, Arendt objected to the possibility that the mentality of the jobholder would overpower the mentality of the political actor. Thus, what she sought to exclude from the political realm was particular *mentalities*, especially those that negate political action and not specific groups of people. In fact, Arendt's concept of *natality* stands for a universal potentiality for freedom since each new comer has the capacity to initiate new and unprecedented things.<sup>170</sup> In this sense, her wariness of the private realm and its corresponding laboring activity is to be regarded as an anxiety with the activity itself and not an indictment of its doer. Thus, it is important for this study that maternal organizations' endorsement of motherhood be analyzed along with their actions, for it is precisely their actions that give us an account of women's coming to political life. Maternal activism in Juárez did the unexpected by creating an unprecedented movement whose main purpose is to transform a political system that pretends that the killings are normal incidents.

To read maternal activism in the language of freedom and the child is to understand the deployment of motherhood allows women, even if they are not the victims' biological mothers, to assert their capacity to act politically on behalf of the

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<sup>168</sup> Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," (Europäisches institut für progressive kulturpolitik, 2011), <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>. See also Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*.

<sup>169</sup> Honig, *Political Theory*, 82.

<sup>170</sup> On this point, Patchen Markell offers an interpretation that is contrary to mine. See Patchen Markell, "The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê, and Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 100 (February 2006): 1-14.

victims. This is so because the disappearance/murder of the daughter in Juárez interrupted women's silence and passivity, transforming them into acting beings. Therefore, it is less relevant that the organizations take to the streets either as aggressive youth, politicians, feminists, professional activists, or mothers, because what matters is that they *do*. Were mothers to hand over speech and action to politicians, feminists or human rights activists solely, they could never think of themselves as capable of exercising political freedom, nor could they aspire to create and be part of a democratic society. Protesters' performance of motherhood is from the outset a political act that carries with it the attempt to force open spaces hitherto closed to women. This political act allowed self-portrayed mothers to reclaim the victims not only as daughters but, more notably, as human beings who deserve justice. Positing maternal organizations as an instance of how Arendt's understands freedom and the child helps us to cast them in a new light by highlighting the fact that they initiated a powerful movement that challenged extreme violence against women. In doing so, they resignified maternalism and wrest it from its patriarchal monopoly.

When read in these terms, maternal organizations look indeed very different than is often acknowledged. At stake is not only a reevaluation of maternal activism but also a refusal to uphold the view that women themselves are somehow responsible for the violence they suffer. Instead of accepting this premise, we can turn to Arendt who considers that individuals find the occasion to be free and to begin something new because they share the world with others and when things befall them, they find with those others an opportunity to act. *Mujeres de Negro* and similar organizations did something other than simply mourn as mothers. They interrupted their habitual roles to

form a movement that became a key symbol for anti-femicide activism inside Mexico and around the world. It is true that maternal organizations have not completely stopped the killings, however they did interrupt a life of passivity, obedience, and submission. This is the lesson we learn in Arendt's discussion of freedom and the child.



**CHAPTER 4**  
**TALKING HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER:**  
**AN ACTIVIST PERSPECTIVE**

Let us assume that the only  
human response to death is mourning.  
But is mourning a response to senseless death?<sup>171</sup>

Marc Nichanian

I have been harassed and threatened instead of getting news about my daughter.  
What I want is to find her and not get so many threats  
and for them to stop harassing me.  
I want justice and for them to find my daughter...  
In 2003, they beat me and surrounded my house.  
They have followed me and called me on the phone to threaten me.  
They tried to pick me up too.<sup>172</sup>

Eva Arce

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<sup>171</sup> Marc Nichanian, "Catastrophic Mourning," in David L Eng and David Kazanjian, ed., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 105. Author' translation.

<sup>172</sup> Testimonio Mrs. Eva Arce as quoted in Fregoso and Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women*, 47.

## Introduction

This chapter discusses two main themes related to femineicidal violence. These are activism and human rights discourses. Since the early days of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, human rights discourse has been central to the anti-femineicide struggle and, like maternal activism discussed in the preceding chapters, human rights language has become increasingly incorporated into the activist agenda to raise awareness about femineicide and enforced disappearance internationally. Today, the anti-femineicide struggle in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua is also a struggle to create a social and political environment whereby every one recognizes, respects, and protects women's human rights. In a sense, then, human rights discourses are recognized as an essential feature of the struggle to achieve women's equality in this troubled border space even if critics have long recognized the limitations that exist in contemporary appeals to human rights discourse and practice.

How exactly did femineicide become a human rights concern in northern Mexico? How did the language of human rights traveled to this border space? Who gains from the mobilization of human rights discourse and practice? For a long time, writers in political theory have sought to examine what human rights do for those who suffer nameless injustices.<sup>173</sup> At one level, critics note that human discourses and norms mask imperialist projects seeking economic and political interests.<sup>174</sup> In this case, powerful states use human rights to justify military intervention, commercial, financial, and economic

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<sup>173</sup> Talal Asad, "What Do Human Rights Do? an Anthropological Enquiry," *Theory & Event*. 4 (2000); Wendy Brown, "'The Most we can Hope For...o: Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism'. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. 103 (Spring/summer, 2004): 451-463; Ayten Gündođdu, "'Perplexities of the Rights of Man': Arendt on the Aporias of Human Rights." *European Journal of Political Theory*. 11.1 (2012): 4-24; Laqueur, "The Dead Body."

<sup>174</sup> Brown, "'The Most we can Hope For;," David Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond Human Rights and International Intervention*, (London: Pluto, 2006).

exploitation in poor nations. At another level, human rights, while limiting and unenforceable, are proposed as an alternative system of justice capable of countering state violence.<sup>175</sup> In this case, human rights are posited as capable of calling oppressive governments accountable for the wrongs that they perpetrate against their own population. While there is some truth to these claims, what is oftentimes missing in the literature is how those who appeal to human rights discourses understand them to work for their cause. How, in other words, advocates of human rights use them in their daily struggles. This chapter addresses these questions through the empirical case of femicide in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, arguing that human rights discourses and norms are more complex in practice. I show how human rights discourses became a central feature of the anti-femicide struggle in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City. At the same time, I argue that activists' appeal to human rights discourses does have the unintended consequences of fueling the expansion of state violence rather than simple helping to counter it as it is often assumed.

To make this argument, I trace the emergence of human rights discourses in northern Mexico to its origins in the work of Ester Chávez Cano, founder of two activist groups dedicated to protect and promote women's rights: El Grupo 8 de Marzo de Ciudad Juárez and Casa Amiga. Chávez Cano has been widely credited for having compiled the first femicide archive,<sup>176</sup> which she began documenting in 1993. She is also recognized for initiating the activist talk on human rights in her regular contributions to the most

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<sup>175</sup> Michael Ignatieff and Amy Gutmann, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>176</sup> While I am employing the term femicide in this genealogy of human rights appeal in Ciudad Juárez, I want to alert the reader to the fact that the term was not used at the time when Esther Chávez Cano began documenting extreme cases of violence against women. The term came later through the work of professor Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso who based her analysis of gender-based violence in Ciudad Juárez in the term *femicide* coined by Diane Russell and Jill Radford.

prominent newspapers in Ciudad Juárez. But while Chávez Cano was a pioneering figure in the mobilization of human rights discourses in the region, anti-feminicide activists, and the victims' mothers have also played a central role in the interpretation, promotion, and development of human rights discourses and norms. In fact, as I will discuss below, the activists emphasis on impunity, a term that has been defined through the experiences of the victims' mothers, has been crucial in the struggle to redefine female homicides in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua as a human rights violations.

This analysis of activists' mobilization of human rights discourses in Ciudad Juárez makes an important intervention in the existing literature by arguing that the seemingly contradictory characterization of human rights discourses—on the one hand as instruments of power, and, on the other, as alternative systems of justice capable of countering state power—may actually operate together in practice. To make this argument, I look at existing definitions of impunity steaming from recent feminicide literature as well as activists own accounts. I then compare these definitions to the lessons learned in the paradigmatic case of Campo Algodonero, a historic event named after the horrific discovery of eight female corpses in an empty lot that goes by this name in November 2001. I argue that we do better to revise existing notions of impunity since our current understanding of this term does not do a good job in capturing how state violence is being expanded in response to the activists' accusations that the state ignores women's human rights systematically. Because I argue that human rights discourses were sought as an alternative mechanism of justice to remedy and redress a long tradition of state's discrimination against women, my second question is what are the gains—and,

conversely, the limitations—of incorporating human language into the ongoing struggle to eradicate femicide and bring about justice for the victims’ families?

This chapter is organized as follows. After this brief introduction, I discuss the history behind the incorporation of human rights discourses in the struggle against gender-based violence at the border. Next, I lay out the state responses to female homicides as a preamble for my discussion of contemporary scholarly and activist notions of impunity. As I mentioned above, the mothers’ interactions with state institutions have provided the vocabulary as well as the content to define this term. I then discuss contemporary critiques of human rights discourse and practice, arguing that we miss part of the picture if we understand human rights either as mere instruments of power, or as alternative systems of justice capable of countering state power. As the Juárez’s experience shows, human rights discourses play both roles in practice. Finally, I end this chapter by arguing that we need to revise existing notions of impunity since our current understanding of this term is inadequate to capture all the things that the state *does* in response to the activists’ accusations that the state neglects women’s human rights systematically. Contemporary definitions of impunity need to consider the term positively—that is in its active capacity—to make visible the different ways in which the state expands and reproduces violence.

### **Talking Human Rights: Ester Chávez Cano and the Production of the 1<sup>st</sup> Femicide Archive**

How exactly did the struggle against femicide in Ciudad Juárez become a human rights cause? 1993 was an emblematic year in the history of this city not because femicide

began at this moment. To be sure, it is very likely that there had been other female deaths before this year. However, 1993 is significant because it interrupted the generalized ignorance people had about the severity of gender-based violence in that region. This happened mainly because of the work of a local activist, Ester Chávez Cano, who began documenting the recurring crimes against women. For Chávez Cano, the Juárez's killings were the most extreme form of a violence that was already evident since the day she arrived into the city in 1982. As she recalls, the city struck her as a city of women, but also because the women of Ciudad Juárez encountered countless forms of violence on a daily basis. Some of the most visible manifestations of this structural violence made their way to the pages of two of the most important local newspapers *El Diario* and *Periodico Norte de Ciudad Juárez*.

Chávez Cano began keeping records of an informal list of cases involving female homicides in the city ever since she noticed the rape and murder of a 13-year-old called Esperanza Leiva on November 15, 1993.<sup>177</sup> It was “the need to give these women a name and a face,” she said, what led her to build the first femicide archive to preserve the historical memory of the daunting violence.<sup>178</sup> She used the information on her archive to call the authorities' attention to the problem, but the local leaders did not respond to her call. As she notes, “we had gone to talk to the major. He promised to get higher authorities involved... but he never did anything for us. What we were trying to get people to see was a general climate of violence against women.”<sup>179</sup> While the local authorities ignored Chávez Cano's cry for help, her efforts to denounce the killings did

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<sup>177</sup> Sam Quinones, “The Death Women of ,” in Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, *Puro Border: Dispatches, Snapshots & Graffiti*, (El Paso, Tex: Cinco Puntos Press, 2003), 139.

<sup>178</sup> Chávez Cano, *Construyendo Caminos*, 89.

<sup>179</sup> Chávez Cano as quoted in Quinones, “The Death Women of Juárez” 139-140.

not cease. In fact, she kept talking about these extreme manifestations of violence almost daily.<sup>180</sup> At the same time, Chávez Cano began raising awareness about women's issues like their right to have an abortion, extreme poverty among single mothers, or female exploitation at the maquiladoras. For more than 12 years, she also wrote articles that revolved around the lives of women in Juárez, their lack of rights, the violence that they frequently encountered, the importance of education for women, and women's human rights.<sup>181</sup> In them, she described the hellish conditions thousands of working class women endured every day to make a living and support their families financially. But it wasn't until 1997 that Ester Chávez Cano published her first article on human rights.<sup>182</sup> In doing so, she transformed the problem of violence against women into a human rights issue.

Prior to 1997, gender based homicides were still regarded as part of the continued violence against women, a problem that most people attributed to the remnants of patriarchal social arrangements, as well as organized crime. In fact, this is how the government described the crimes. In the eyes of local and state officials, the killings of women were sporadic acts of violence, which had no connection between them.<sup>183</sup> Initially, the phenomenon that began with the disappearance of women and culminated with the discovery of dead bodies in the city's outskirts was identified with the term "*Las Muertas de Juárez* (the dead women of Juárez)." It was the first attempt to name this recurring phenomenon. Yet, over time the phrase was dropped because it did not reflect

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<sup>180</sup> Julia E. Monárrez Frago. Professor and Researcher at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte. In conversation with the author. August 5, 2013.

<sup>181</sup> I had the opportunity to visit the organization Casa Amiga during the summer of 2013. The current director, Irma Guadalupe Casas Franco gave me access to the Chávez Cano library kept within Casa Amiga. There I was able to consult several articles that Chávez Cano published for *El Diario* of Ciudad Juárez.

<sup>182</sup> See the Ester Chávez Cano Collection hosted at the New Mexico State University Library. Part of the Collection can be accessed at <http://lib.nmsu.edu/exhibits/chavezcano/papers/>

<sup>183</sup> Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez, *Campo Algodonero*, 24.

the criminal agency of the act. In other words, the term “*Las Muertas de Juárez*” does not reflect the fact that these were not natural deaths, but the product of someone else’s actions. The dead women of Juárez did not simply die. These women were brutally killed. Hence, ensuing explanations shifted towards analyses that closely scrutinized globalization processes and neoliberal policies taking place in Juárez through the maquiladora industry.<sup>184</sup> Work exploitation and high turnout levels were offered as an explanation for the ill treatment of women and their characterization as disposable beings.

Human rights advocates like Esther Chávez Cano, however, did not see gender-based homicides exclusively as part of the longstanding legacy of patriarchal ideology still ingrained in social norms and values. It did not see gender-based violence as solely related to globalization either. Rather, the human rights framework defined gender based violence as a problem enabled by state institutions, which failed to provide an adequate response to the killings. “The dead women of Juárez are not just a product of misogyny,” Chávez Cano said, “these women were raped, brutally tortured, and finally killed. The pain of their families will not end, especially since injustice and impunity prevail at the three levels of government because the institutions in charge of investigating and prosecuting these crimes are more interested in showing a “pretty face” to international human rights organizations.”<sup>185</sup> While Chávez Cano is not saying that the Mexican state committed these killings directly—presumably husbands, boyfriends, brothers, relatives,

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<sup>184</sup> Wright, *Disposable Women* ; González-Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine*; Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, (Houston, Tex: Arte Publico Press., 2003); Livingston, "Murder in Juárez."

<sup>185</sup> Chávez Cano, *Construyendo Caminos*, 92.



or criminals did this to women,<sup>186</sup> she is accusing the state for turning a blind eye to women's problems.

In the ceremony organized to honor Chávez Cano with the National Prize of Human Rights in 2008, the awardee emphasized the fact that the large numbers of female homicides in Juárez could not be considered isolated cases that simply reflected deviant or rare pathologies observed in certain individuals. For her, gender-based violence in Juárez had to do with the lack of an adequate system of justice that is also attentive to social and economic conditions that condemn women to extreme poverty and marginalization.<sup>187</sup> Chávez Cano's accusation resonated with the victims' relatives who, in numerous times, complained that government officials did not help them when they sought their collaboration to find their relatives. In their view, the government did not help them because "the victims were poor women."<sup>188</sup> The families also complained that the government delayed investigations, denied information to the victims' families, and destroyed important documents and evidence related to femicide and enforced disappearance cases. Police authorities also failed to design adequate mechanisms to prevent future cases of enforced disappearance and femicide.<sup>189</sup>

According to the families, the government kept denying that Ciudad Juárez faced a problem of systematic discrimination against women despite that, since 1993, the rate of female homicides kept growing.<sup>190</sup> Instead, government officials justified their lack of response by blaming the victims and accusing them of having a dubious lifestyle. To be

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<sup>186</sup> Filmmaker Lourdes Lopez Portillo, however, suggests that police officers in Juárez are directly involved in the murders. See Lourdes Portillo, Olivia Crawford, Julie Mackaman, and Sharon Wood. *Señorita Extraviada*, (New York, NY: Distributed by Women Make Movies, 2001).

<sup>187</sup> Chávez Cano, *Construyendo Caminos*, 42.

<sup>188</sup> Paula Flores as quoted in Bonilla and Pedroza, *La Carta*.

<sup>189</sup> Rodríguez Nieto, *Fabrica* 88-91.

<sup>190</sup> Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez, *Campo Algodonero*, 23.

sure, an analysis conducted by the special relator of human rights reported that, “the Mexican state has declared that the numerous acts of violence against women are sad and even serious. However, it treated them as sporadic happenings, as someone else’s responsibility, or as the product of organized crime. It also claimed that poverty and geographic location propitiated the crimes.”<sup>191</sup> These careless responses and fatal omissions, activists complained, permitted the proliferation of gender based-violence because the government sent the message that violence against women will not be castigated. The government’s lack of investigations and prosecutions is what the activists referred to as impunity.

### **The Trouble with Impunity**

There is a view widely shared by both participants in, and scholars of, the anti-femicide struggle that femicide is a result of impunity.<sup>192</sup> In fact, the process of framing femicide and enforced disappearance as a human rights violation has been dependent on the implication of local and state authorities in these two forms of violence.<sup>193</sup> It was the suggestion that the Mexican state was acting with impunity what helped the victims’ mothers, activists, and academics to employ the term femicide to name the phenomenon of extreme gender based violence in Ciudad Juárez. Thus, while the history behind the development of the concept femicide is related to the term femicide coined by Diana Russell and Jill Radford, the widespread conditions of impunity present in

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>192</sup> Chávez Cano, *Construyendo Caminos*.

<sup>193</sup> Fregoso “We Want Them Alive!;” Schmidt Camacho, “Ciudadana X.”

Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua have provided the necessary elements that allowed local academics and activists to redefine the former concept. Professor Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso, from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte de Ciudad Juárez, was one of the first academics to employ the term feminicide in two important lectures in 1998.<sup>194</sup>

For Monárrez, the history behind the term feminicide can be traced to the combination of several elements: 1) the existence of a term in the literature used to describe the murder of women *qua* women—femicide. 2) The fact that in Ciudad Juárez one could observe a very particular way of murdering women. They were snatched in plain daylight and taken to a place where they were sexually abused, tortured, mutilated, and discarded in the desert, empty lots, and other public spaces. While this way of killing women is not exclusive of Ciudad Juárez because it happens in other places as well, professor Monárrez says, what is particular to the context of Ciudad Juárez is the frequency and impunity. Finally, 3) we also see an anti-feminicide movement that expands its reach from the local to the global arena in order to make visible what was happening in Ciudad Juárez. The convergence of these elements made of the term feminicide an important contribution from the academics working in collaboration with the anti-feminicide activists in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>195</sup> The term feminicide is also an important contribution, according to Monárrez, because “while it named a particular phenomenon in Ciudad Juárez, it also provided an analytical framework to designate similar situations in other parts of Latin America where gender-based homicides were denounced by a group of activists but they did not have the overall vision observed in Juárez.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Monárrez. In conversation with the author. August, 2013.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

As Monárrez's comments show, the idea of impunity is central to understand femicide. Impunity, according to Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "from the Latin *punio* or *punire*, refers to a state of exemption from punishment, or, more literally, exemption from the vengeful blows of retribution."<sup>197</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary also defines impunity as "an exemption from punishment or penalty,"<sup>198</sup> and Merriam Webster, in its online edition, defines impunity as an "exemption or freedom from punishment, harm, or loss."<sup>199</sup> What all these definitions of impunity have in common is a negative approach to the concept of impunity. That is to say, they stress the idea of an absence or privation. As such, impunity denotes the absence of justice. Again, the argument is not that state agents killed these women, although some critics have claimed that they did.<sup>200</sup> Yet, the state did nothing to clear up prior femicide cases, nor it sought to prevent future ones. It did not act with due diligence to organize professional searches to locate the missing women. Because of this, the Mexican state is responsible for what happened to femicide victims since the failure to respond showed that the state was systematically discriminating women.<sup>201</sup> In this respect, impunity is dangerous, according to Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, because "when crime is not punished you send the message that anybody can get away with murder and commit any crime."<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Schmidt Camacho, "Ciudadana X: The Impunity of Femicidio," 1.

<sup>198</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. Online edition consulted on December 15, 2013. See Exemption from punishment or penalty. The definition can be consulted in the following online address: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/92937?redirectedFrom=impunity#eid>

<sup>199</sup> See definition in the following online address: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impunity>.

<sup>200</sup> See for instance Portillo et al., *Señorita Extraviada*.

<sup>201</sup> Centro de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, A.C., CEDEM, "Caso Rubi-Marisela," Chihuahua, Chi. July 2011: 7

<sup>202</sup> Sandra Rodríguez Nieto as quoted in *Dateline NBC: Inside Mexico's Drug War*, produced by Solly Granatstein and Rainer Ramirez. 2011.

It is to this crisis of impunity that the human rights narrative was called upon to respond. Human rights institutions were sought as an alternative system of justice that could remedy the widespread problem of impunity. Academics, activists, and the victims' mothers in Ciudad Juárez followed Ester Chávez Cano's lead in invoking a human rights framework to redress the wrongs committed by the Mexican state against femicide and victims of enforced disappearance. The events in Campo Algodonero was a paradigmatic case in this sense because it triggered the mobilization of human rights discourses against the impunity evident in the way the Mexican state handled this case. Campo Algodonero made it clear, according to Martha Graciela Ramos Carrasco, member of the women's organization Mujeres por Mexico, that an alternative system of justice was needed to address the problem of femicide in northern Mexico. As she explains, before Campo Algodonero, the organizations in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua worked all independently from one another. However, the organizations made the first concerted effort to launch a coordinated campaign to protest femicide after witnessing how the case of Campo Algodonero showed that government officials would not take the necessary steps to address the problem.

The *Éxodo por La vida: ¡Ni Una Mas!* Campaign was the first concerted action to organize a massive march from Chihuahua City to Ciudad Juárez to protest the violence.<sup>203</sup> The purpose was also to expose the incompetence and corruption of the Mexican state internationally since the events in Campo Algodonero did not trigger any coordinated investigation to determine who committed the crimes. Instead, government officials argued that two men responsible for the crimes had been captured. They argued that the presumed culprits confessed having carried out the killings. The reality was,

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<sup>203</sup> Ramos Carrasco, *Memorias*, 54-56.

however, that both men were forced into confession through torture. In addition, the government failed to perform an adequate recovery of the bodies and to request DNA tests. They lost (or destroyed) information related to the crimes and even mixed up body remains of the corpses. In the end, the authorities used intimidation to prevent the victims' families from sharing their stories publicly to expose government officials for mishandling the case.<sup>204</sup>

After noticing how the government approached Campo Algodonero, the organizations began to look for different actions and strategies to address the problem of impunity created by the government. For example, the organizations got together to create the Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, which hosted all the important anti-femicide organizations. The goal was to call the attention of international organizations to the problem of gender-based violence and impunity in the area. Ivon Irabel Mendoza Salazar from El Centro Para el Desarrollo Integral de la Mujer, A.C. (Center for the Integral Development of Women, A.C.) explained that the events of Campo Algodonero sent a clear message that none of the three levels of government were genuinely interested in finding the underlying cause of the problem of violence in Juárez. This was made evident after the organization conducted a survey in key areas of Ciudad Juárez. In it, residents expressed a lack of confidence that the authorities would find the real culprits in this case. "It became clear for us, Salazar said, that different alternatives were needed to remedy the injustice surrounding femicide."<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez, *Campo Algodonero*, 28.

<sup>205</sup> Ivon Irabel Mendoza Salazar from Centro Para el Desarrollo Integral de la Mujer, A.C. In conversation with the author, July 23, 2013.

The survey also showed that the public in general supported the proposal to bring international human rights organizations. Thus, local organization began to call the attention of international agencies, especially those with a human rights orientation, to get them involved in the process of making visible the persistent structural violence against women in Ciudad Juárez. “It was at this moment,” Mendoza Salazar notes, “that we decided to sue the Mexican government before the Inter American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) for failing to remedy the systematic discrimination against women in Ciudad Juárez.”<sup>206</sup>

### **The Feminist Production of Human Rights**

In 2001, the Inter American Court of Human Rights was sought to indict the Mexican State for perpetuating human rights violations in *Caso González y Otras (Campo Algodonero) v. Mexico*, simply known as *Campo Algodonero*. As I explained earlier, the case dealt with the discovery of eight female corpses in an empty lot near the headquarters of the *Maquiladora Association* in Ciudad Juárez. Three of the bodies identified in this lot corresponded to Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, Claudia Ivette González, and Laura Berenice Ramos Monárrez. The families of these three women agreed to sue the Mexican government for gross violations to their human rights.

In November 16, 2009 the IACHR ruled that the Mexican state was responsible for these murders since it failed to activate the “reiterated elements of due diligence originally articulated in the seminal *Velasquez Rodriguez* case... the duty to prevent, investigate,

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

punish, and compensate.”<sup>207</sup> The court ordered reparations for the families and the construction of a memorial on behalf of all femicide victims.

This brief account of femicide in Ciudad Juárez shows that anti-femicide activists sought human rights institutions and norms as an alternative system of justice capable of framing gender based homicides as a legitimate cause that human rights institutions needed to address. The point, however, is not to say that human rights are inherently good or that they offer a better system of justice for it has long been established that human rights can be both: a means to redress systematic wrongs as well as instruments available to the powerful seeking to dominate the world. This is in fact the central argument in Talal Asad’s “What Do Human Rights Do? an Anthropological Enquiry.”<sup>208</sup> As he explains, human rights not only compete against states in their quest to reduce human suffering, for “human rights depend... on national rights. States are essential to the protection they offer. This means that states can and do use human rights discourse against their citizens—as colonial empires used it against their subjects—to realize their civilizing project.”<sup>209</sup> Human rights, in other words, have the potential to reduce as well as to produce suffering and this is more evident in imperial projects pursued in the name of human rights as in the case of the war in Iraq.

Wendy Brown is more critical about the imperial project masked behind discourses of human rights. For her, human rights carry a “particular form of political power,” and “a particular image of justice” which we do better to understand, scrutinize,

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<sup>207</sup> The document can be seen at:  
<https://www.law.georgetown.edu/rossrights/documents/CampoAlgodonero.pdf>

<sup>208</sup> Asad, “What Do Human Rights Do?”

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 11.



and judge more closely.<sup>210</sup> Brown's argument is offered against Michael Ignatieff's idea that human rights constitute an antipolitical, neutral, or "minimalist defense of the innocent and the powerless against power, a pure defense of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism, patriarchy, and other mobilizations or instantiations of collective power against individuals."<sup>211</sup> This so-called minimalist rendering of human rights hides, according to Brown, a political project that upholds liberal individualism over projects of collective justice in non-liberal societies.

While Brown's critique of human rights is not entirely rejecting their invocation as instruments capable of waning the suffering of individuals and groups, her quarrel is directed at the language deployed by human rights discourses which end up producing modern individuals, or a liberal mindset so to speak. Human rights offer a language of individual empowerment she notes along with Ignatieff, but they do more than that. "Rights language has been central not simply to the protection, but also to the production of modern individuals, a production that he [Ignatieff] specifies as the process of becoming an individual."<sup>212</sup> This individual is not only invoking rights for her own protection, she is also being produced and regulated by this very same invocation. In other words, human rights discourses produce individuals who define themselves as "victims" of authoritarian states given that the human rights project is limited to liberal rights—for example freedom from state violence. But the problem with this is that this project "carries implicitly antipolitical aspirations for its subjects."<sup>213</sup> These antipolitical

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<sup>210</sup> Brown, "The Most we can Hope For," 453; Ignatieff and Gutmann, *Human Rights as Politics*.

<sup>211</sup> Brown, "The Most we can Hope For," 453.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 455.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid. 456.

aspirations are best described as a wish to be free from politics rather than actually pursuing collective ends. In the end, Brown notes, the subject that is produced through discourses of human rights is detached from her context and portrayed as an autonomous individual in a way that it undermines larger political projects. For example, human rights stand in opposition to collective justice projects.

Absent in Brown's critiques of human rights is an analysis of how human rights discourses, norms, and recommendations are also invoked when those injured by State power, or lack thereof, enlist them to make claims about justice. To elaborate, human rights do not only produce modern individuals who are also regulated by the very power they invoke when they enlist them. Human rights, in other words, "are not [just] norms that can be unilaterally declared by some authority"<sup>214</sup> as in the case of the Inter American Human Rights Commission which intervened to sanction the Mexican State. Rather, human rights are also "proposals made by and to free equal persons and peoples."<sup>215</sup> In "Rethinking Human Rights and the Enlightenment: A View from the Twenty-First Century," James Tully traces a genealogy of human rights, noting that there are two distinct traditions of human rights that stem from the European Enlightenment. The first tradition claims that, "human rights are something that can be unilaterally declared by an authority because they are self-evident universal truths that are beyond debate."<sup>216</sup> This version of human rights resonates with the version of human rights that Brown objects in her critique of Ignatieff. This is the view of human rights from the perspective of the

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<sup>214</sup> James Tully, "Rethinking Human Rights and Enlightenment: A View From the Twenty-First Century" (Unpublished Document, 2010): 19.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 2.

“good” legislator, according to Tully, “who has the power to project rights and institutions over the world.”<sup>217</sup>

There is, however, another tradition of human rights, according to Tully, that is more relevant for today’s context. This second tradition claims that rights are “proposals, which need to be suggested to fellow citizens by fellow citizens, rather than declared by an authority... The reason for this is that rights are not self-evident, but, rather, they are always open to question and critical examination by the humans who are subject to them.”<sup>218</sup> This second tradition of human rights described by Tully is more attentive to the interests and motivations of those activists seeking to attain political change. From this perspective, activists and human rights defenders shape the content of human rights discourses, norms, and law as well as their relationship with established structures of power. James Tully’s theorization, offers a framework to consider an activist perspective of human rights that is not merely imposed from the outside to a particular cause or struggle, but, rather, is generated from a particular space of resistance like Ciudad Juárez, especially since human rights seem to be popular tools for social movements.

Tully is useful here because he rejects a unilateral approach to human rights and also because this activist approach to human rights is present in Ciudad Juárez. As Rosa Linda Fregoso notes, it was the victims’ mothers, activists, artists, the grassroots movement that emerged in response to femicide who:

[H]elped to redefine gender-based violence as human rights violation and to focus the eyes and ears of the world on Mexico as a state sponsoring

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

terror against its population directly and indirectly and through its complicity with the terror machine and its negligence in preventing and stopping the disappearance of sexual murders of women on the border.<sup>219</sup>

In this quote, Fregoso notes how the victims' mothers, activists, and academics redefined gender-based violence as a human rights problem by emphasizing state terror in the form of corruption and the neglect of the most vulnerable groups. What is important to note, however, is not just that they reframed gender-based violence as a human rights issue but, rather, that human rights were invoked, interpreted, and mobilized by activists themselves to redress gender-based violence re-produced through impunity. "The fact that petitions by small groups of mothers of the victims were systematically ignored, together with an open offensive discourse towards the victims, fostered national indignation," says author Olga Aikin Araluce.<sup>220</sup> In this sense, a human rights language was used to create awareness that the government's refusal to conduct investigations, its denial of information to the families, and its manipulation of evidence was a blatant violation on the part of the state. At the same time, the language of human rights helped the families to understand that the state's refusal to investigate femicide and enforce disappearance is a form of discrimination against the victims themselves and their families which should not be tolerated.

Organizations such as Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, for example, have worked with a number of families whose daughters disappear or were killed. One of the main

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<sup>219</sup> Fregoso, "We Want them Alive," 373.

<sup>220</sup> Olga Aikin Araluce, "Transnational Advocacy Networks, International Norms, and Political Change in Mexico," in Kathleen A. Staudt, Tony Payan, and Z. Anthony Kruszewski eds., *Human Rights Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 154.

goals of this organizations has been to use the experience of old families to teach new ones how to pressure government authorities so they do their job of assisting them. In the words of Irene Miramontes, “here in Justicia, one of the objectives is to teach the families to find the means to pressure the authorities so that they do the work of investigating where are the disappeared women, or who are those responsible of committing the crime in femicide cases.”<sup>221</sup> Thus, in organizations like Justicia, families learn that the authorities are obliged to help them regardless of economic status, occupation, and similar considerations. They also learn that government assistance is not a favor that the families need to beg for, but an obligation that the state has to fulfill. Likewise, families learn that the situation of violence is not an individual problem that occurred to them because of “bad luck.” Instead, participants in Justicia talk about enforced disappearance and femicide as structural problems that reflect the persisting conditions of discrimination against women in a city like Juárez. In this sense, violence is a problem enabled by neoliberal state institutions and not simply a problem that originates and ends inside the families.<sup>222</sup>

Organizations like Justicia also promote liberation by teaching the families what kind of information they should request from the authorities. For instance, the first thing that the families learn is that the responsibility of conducting the investigations should not fall on the families themselves, but on state institutions like the police or the federal prosecution agency. They tell the families that the authorities have to: 1) look for the missing person, 2) request a phone records, 3) carry out *rastreos*, 4) provide frequent updates to the family, 5) treat them with respect, 6) assist them periodically, etc. In sum,

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<sup>221</sup> Miramontes, in conversation with the author. July 10, 2013.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

human rights discourse and norms gives families the language to name the kind of violence that many women face as well as the specific abuses that the families have encountered in order to indicate the larger problems that they want to see being remedied; namely, impunity.

### **Impunity Redefined**

Thanks to the work of activists like Ester Chaves Cano and organizations such as El Centro de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, Casa Amiga, La Red Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juarez, El Centro de los Derechos Humanos Paso del Norte, or Por un Chihuahua Libre y Sin Temor, in a very short period, from 1997 to 2009, the state of Chihuahua went from being a very conservative to a progressive state in terms of gender-based legislation. From 1997 on, the victims' mothers, activists, artists, women, and human rights organizations have been shown a very dynamic mobilization to propose and extend new laws to protect women's rights. The activists and organizations demanded the creation of especial offices destined to investigate crimes against women. As a result, in 1995, the especial agency for sex crimes was inaugurated and 1996 saw the creation of the special agency for the investigation of crimes against women. In 2003, following the events of Campo Algodonero, a new law was approved to recognize gender based homicides as a new modality of crime that carries harshest sentences.

In all these initiatives, activists as well as women and human rights organizations have been closely involved, proposing, drafting, and pressuring for the approval of these

new laws. While critiques regarding the actual efficacy of these initiatives abound,<sup>223</sup> here the point is to show that advocates have been very active in enlisting human rights discourses and norms to frame femicide as a human rights violation due to impunity. This is an important point because it suggests that human rights discourses and norms are not merely a unilateral top down imposition, but also a bottom up fabrication that depends of the support of those activists who seek them as remedy for nameless suffering. This fact lends credit to Tully's claim that human rights are not mere impositions by imperial powers that want to dominate the non-west.<sup>224</sup> In his account, human rights "are proposed as tools for cooperating together and for contesting and changing unjust forms and means of cooperation."<sup>225</sup> As a result, Tully offers us a picture of human rights that is indebted to its activist origins. As I have tried to show in this chapter, the word femicide belongs to the second tradition since activist themselves took on the task of reframing this kind of violence as a human rights violation. Today, there is an initiative currently awaiting resolution from the Inter American Human Rights Court to determine if the term femicide can be included in the list of "atrocities—like genocide—[defined] as a crime against humanity that is gender specific insofar as it targets the most vulnerable women, and girls, on the basis of their social identities: their gender, class and often racial identities."<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> While an analysis that examines the substantial contributions of these laws and institutions is absolutely necessary, such an endeavor is outside of the scope of this chapter. My aim in this chapter is not to assess whether human rights and institutions are good or bad at eradicating Femicide. Rather, I see to understand how the task of proposing, drafting, and passing legislation respectful of human rights produces it and legitimizes it.

<sup>224</sup> Both Talal Asad and Wendy Brown agree with Tully's premise. However, their analysis is centered on the critique of human rights rather than in their dynamism. The question is not just about the possibilities, limitations, and forms of subjection that human rights enable. At stake is rather the mutual interdependency of human rights and those who invoke them.

<sup>225</sup> Tully, "Rethinking Human Rights," 19.

<sup>226</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Witnessing," 8.

Femicide, as an analytic and political category for the murder, with State impunity, of women and girls because they are female, is a new legal formulation proposed by those who are affected by a new modality of crime. The claim, however, is not simply about who imposes human rights discourses and norms and who consumes them uncritically. It is also about who produces human rights laws and institutions and who simply invoke them or adapt them to their own realities. It is about dependency: victims depending on the human rights system to redress their suffering or active formulation, whereby human rights are interpreted, produced and mobilized as an alternative system of justice. In short, it is about who legitimizes and who is legitimized. It is not only about what human rights do for the Escobedos and the Chávez Canos who write and speak about them, but also about how the Escobedos and Chávez Canos's document and name their own experiences. Human rights are not merely proposed or adapted when invoked by multiple actors. The process is more fluid and dynamic than some authors are willing to grant. This is not an argument for or against human rights, but rather about who gets to formulate the crimes, injuries, and the violations that get protected under human rights law and institutions and who gets to consume, adapt, or endorse. The process in my view resembles a two-way street where victims of nameless suffering are as dependent of the human rights system as the system depends on them.

There is however, another aspect that happens on the ground which any analysis of human rights needs to address. I am referring to the risks that I see in framing impunity in negative terms as the *passive* state of doing *nothing* to investigate, prosecute, and punish femicidal violence for there is a larger danger in seeking state retribution when that state has shown lacking credentials on the question of justice. What



I want to argue here is simple. We need to redefine the notion of impunity since the concept has been mainly understood negatively to denote the absence of justice. This conception of impunity, however, needs to be understood, scrutinized, and judged more closely since human rights can also trigger the expansion of state violence.<sup>227</sup> The negative approach to the notion of impunity neglects all the active steps that the Mexican state takes to silence its critics.

Here, I want to suggest that impunity should be understood as an active, rather than merely a negative, term. The events of Campo Algodonero can best illustrate what I am trying to suggest here since this paradigmatic case shows that impunity does not simply denote an absence, lack, or a privation. Immediately after the discovery of the eight female corpses in Campo Algodonero was announced, the government declared that the two men who had participated in the murder of these women were immediately arrested. Officials also declared that the two men confessed to their crimes. This abrupt move by the government suggests that the local and state police departments did in fact take certain measures to address the problem of femicide almost since the very beginning. It took, in other words, a series of active steps to *produce* culprits to silence protests and mobilizations that condemned femicide. In addition, the government issued direct threats to the families who were contesting the official version that femicide culprits had been apprehended and that the cases were solved. Mrs. Arce's testimony above speaks to this tactic. As she explained, "I have been harassed and threatened instead of getting news about my daughter. What I want is to find her and not get so many threats and for them to stop harassing me. I want justice and for them to find my

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<sup>227</sup> Brown, "The Most we can Hope For," 453; Ignatieff and Gutmann, *Human Rights as Politics*.

daughter... In 2003, they beat me and surrounded my house. They have followed me and called me on the phone to threaten me. They tried to pick me up too.”<sup>228</sup>

Since Campo Algodonero, the three levels of government have been under increasing pressure to solve the killings and enforced disappearance of women. The permanent campaign ¡Ni Una Mas! succeeded in drawing international attention to the problem of femicide in Ciudad Juárez despite that the government continued denying that the city faced a systematic problem of gender-based violence. International pressure is forcing the government to find solutions to the crimes since, as Chávez Cano explained, “the institutions in charge of investigating and prosecuting these crimes are more interested in showing a pretty face before international human rights organizations,”<sup>229</sup> than to solving the problems. Because of this, local and state authorities are increasingly arguing that all femicide cases have been resolved. As a result, activists’ appeal to human rights discourses, I argue, have had the unintended consequences of expanding, rather than simply redressing, state violence in Ciudad Juárez.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that human rights discourses have been central to the anti-femicide struggle in Ciudad Juárez. Human rights language has become increasingly incorporated into the activist agenda to raise awareness about femicide and enforced disappearance internationally and to redress state violence which has taken the form of

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<sup>228</sup> Mrs. Arce as quoted in Fregoso and Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women*, 47.

<sup>229</sup> Chávez Cano, *Construyendo Caminos*, 92.

systematic impunity. Today, the anti-femicide struggle in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua is also a struggle to create a social and political environment whereby every one recognizes, respects, and protects women's human rights. In this vein, human rights discourses are an essential feature of the struggle to achieve women's equality. However, In this chapter I have also argued that human rights invocations have also had the unintended consequences of expanding, not only redressing, state violence.

In their quest to avoid international sanctions, the government has sought to silence anti-femicide protests by torturing presumed criminals into confession, forcing them to take responsibility for crimes that they did not commit. In fact, human rights organizations in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua have noted that the cases of torture and imprisonment have been increasing considerably in recent years. Indeed human rights organizations are increasingly documenting cases of torture along with enforce disappearance, and femicide. In addition, the government has attacked human rights organizations and the victims' families so that they stop protesting (See chapter 2, for a discussion of Marisela Escobedo's case). This situation suggests that impunity should not be taken solely (or not only) as designating the things that the government does *not* do to clear up femicide and enforce disappearance cases. On the contrary, it should incorporate a more comprehensive analysis of the active steps that the government takes to silence protests, namely, torturing citizens into confession, producing culprits to silence dissent, freeing perpetrators of crimes, mishandling forensic information, threatening protesters, discrediting them, and even physically harming them to buy silence.

In the past few years, the Mexican government has been collaborating with human rights organizations to produce human rights legislation. Concrete examples are the creation of the Women's Institute of Chihuahua the creation of human rights commissions, the establishment of government agencies focusing on women's issues, and so on. Traditional understandings of impunity have not incorporated these active steps to coopt human rights language that gives continuity to the government's strategy of simulation. Impunity, therefore, needs to be redefined to not only designate the state's failure to act because indeed it has done so by conducting illegal detentions, fabricating presumed criminals through acts of torture, and maintaining a system of indeterminate detentions in connection with femicide crimes without actually guarantying the prevention, investigation, and sanction of violence against women. Impunity also needs to incorporate pressuring the families to abandon the investigations related to the murder and or disappearance of their daughters. Threatening the families and even exercising direct violence towards them. Thus, while defining impunity as the state's inaction might help the cause of redefining gender-based violence as a human rights issue, we might be overlooking the fact that more violence is simultaneously being produced as a result of demands to end gender-based violence.

While it is true that human rights can be used as a trope to consolidate imperialist projects, it is also true that human rights can help activists to call authoritarian states accountable for the atrocities that they commit. In most cases, however, human rights do both things simultaneously as the example of Ciudad Juárez shows. Activists do not simply use and adapt human rights for their just causes. In fact, they produce human

rights discourses and norms to name their particular experiences. This very fact allows some important room for revision, reinterpretation, and change.

## CHAPTER 5

### *ACOMPANIAMIENTO AND THE ETHICS OF CARE*

Ethics is back in literary studies, as is in philosophy and political theory, and indeed the very critique of universal men and the autonomous human subject that had initially produced a resistance to ethics have now generated a cross over among these various disciplines that sees and does ethics “otherwise.”<sup>230</sup>

Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz.

Ethics and morality have become recently very fashionable... What are we witnessing with the current infatuation with the humanitarian crusades and ethically correct good causes is the triumph of a sort of moralizing liberalism that is increasingly feeling the void left by the collapse of any project of real political transformation. This moralization of society is... a consequence of the lack of any credible political alternative to the current dominance of neoliberalism.<sup>231</sup>

Chantal Mouffe

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<sup>230</sup> Marjorie B. Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. *The Turn to Ethics*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>231</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Which Ethics for Democracy?” in Garber et al., *The Turn to Ethics*.

## Introduction

How is life possible in a murder city? What kind of social and political existence, if any, is possible in a city of death? What are the mechanisms and strategies whereby precarious populations survive diverse streams of violence? This chapter has two main goals. The first goal is to discuss the practice of *acompañamiento* as it emerged in Ciudad Juárez alongside other practices such as maternal activism, the mobilization of human rights discourse and norms, and the *funeralization of the city*. The second goal is to discuss the practice *acompañamiento* as an ethic of care and resistance whereby long-term processes of violence are managed, contained, or delayed and new logics of care are developed to grapple with multiple streams of violence. As I will explain below, *acompañamiento* describes the terrain of action upon which the violence present at the border meets with new logics of safety, protection, and resistance developed by Ciudad Juárez's residents in the face of increasing mistrust of state and federal institutions. These logics of resistance are concretely materialized in a program devised by the organization *Mujeres por México* and reproduced by *El CEDEM*, La Red Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez, JPNH, and many other organizations to support women victims of domestic violence.

The practice of *acompañamiento*, however, also travels outside this activist space producing multiple terrains of resistance—neighborhoods, poor shantytowns or *colonias*, art studios, media spaces, schools, etc.—where new collective forms of organization emerge. In the midst of intense violence, the most pressing question for Juárez's residents became how to survive in a city where life is always at stake. This practical question became an everyday struggle to navigate the increasing state of vulnerability that affected

most residents of the city. I argue that new logics of collective organization emerged in the process of creating such spaces of resistance. As such, the proliferation of collective terrains of resistance remains a central concern in this chapter. Some of the central questions guiding this chapter are: what kind of resistance is *acompañamiento*? What form of political intervention does this practice entail? What kinds of reconfiguration of power are made possible through *acompañamiento*? And what, if any, forms of political change follow from this practice?

I begin this chapter by focusing on the meaning of *acompañamiento* and how this practice developed in Ciudad Juárez. I also explore what the political ramifications of this practice are and ask what can we learn about the present context of Ciudad Juárez by looking at *acompañamiento*. I focus on an activist program called *compañeras solidarias*—created by the organization Mujeres por México—because it captures the ethical underpinnings behind the practice of *acompañamiento*. A central aspect of this practice is the idea that violence—gendered and otherwise—is not an individual problem that affects few women in their own particular individuality but a common concern in need of collective intervention. Discussing the program of *compañeras solidarias* is important not only because it shows the concrete actions that are implemented to protest and contest gender-based violence, but also because this program shows that institutional structures (re)produce and multiply existing streams of violence.

After explaining what the practice of *acompañamiento* is, I show the extent to which this practice constitutes a realm of action that finds multiple forms of articulation within particular spaces of the city. Showing how the practice of *acompañamiento* operates outside the specific program of *compañeras solidarias* will allow us to see that



the spaces of resistance are not limited to traditional arenas of debate such as streets, public squares, government buildings, or plazas. On the contrary, as an ethics of care and resistance the practice of *acompañamiento* reveals that collective action is a movable force, which can be grasped only by looking at the ways in which people organize together to grapple with the violence.

### **Compañeras Solidarias in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

I first listened to the word *acompañamiento* in a warm afternoon of summer, 2012 while having a conversation with members of the women's organization *Mujeres por México*. Six members of this organization met me for an interview about their activism around femicidal violence. When I ask them to describe the main role *Mujeres por México* played in the anti-femicide struggle, the immediate answer I received was: "*nosotras somos una organización que acompaña a las familias de las víctimas de femicidio* (we are an organization whose main objective is to accompany the families of femicide victims)." <sup>232</sup> Here, for the first time since my arrival in Ciudad Juárez, I encountered a concept and a practice that figures prominently among activists. Yet, as I was soon to learn, the concept of "*acompañamiento*," is not only relevant for the anti-femicide movement. In fact, *acompañamiento* is talked about frequently in conversations, discussions, and debates concerning the larger struggle against violence at the border. Journalists, artists, students, and, people in general speak very frequently about the idea

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<sup>232</sup> Hilda De la Vega from Mujeres por México, A.C., In conversation with the author. June 2012.

of *acompañamiento*, a term and a philosophy of life that emerged inside the anti-femicide movement.

But what exactly is *acompañamiento*? What can this practice tell us about the contemporary history of resistance in Ciudad Juárez? What does it mean to accompany the victim's families? And, more importantly, what does *acompañamiento* do for the victims of gender-based violence? As I will show in this chapter, *acompañamiento* is a practice that gives us a glimpse to the common strategies women in Ciudad Juárez developed to deal with the context of intense violence and the imposed militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. In fact, this notion of *acompañamiento* is at the center of an activist program originally implemented by the organization Mujeres por México as a mechanism of support created to assist those women who suffer domestic abuse on a daily basis. *Compañeras solidarias*, however, is more than a simple institutional program. In fact, *compañeras solidarias* can be best understood as a process where care is procured reciprocally between the person who is in charge to provide assistance and the person who receives it. Most generally, the program of *compañeras solidarias* includes several stages that involve different forms of care.

First, as an ethic of care, *compañeras solidarias* starts with the identification and recruitment of volunteer personnel, or *compañeras solidarias*—mostly women—who will assume the responsibility to perform the role of *acompañamiento*. The initial stage of the program involves reaching out to volunteers who want to participate in the program in order to teach them the necessary skills, which will allow them to perform the task of *acompañamiento* effectively. In this way, *compañeras solidarias* learn, within a period of a month, basic information about how to accompany, assist, support, a woman who is

currently suffering the ongoing effects of domestic violence. This stage of the program is mainly concerned with legal and institutional considerations: *compañeras solidarias* receive technical training which will help them identify the institutions that exist to assist women who suffer domestic violence, what different institutions can intervene to stop the violence, and what preventive measures can be taken to protect women and their children.

Once trained, *compañeras solidarias* are called to actually perform the support for which they received prior training. After the training stage, *compañeras solidarias* perform the required task of accompanying a woman who has suffered violence when she goes to the corresponding government institutions to denounce her abuser and to seek legal protection from the authorities. The role of the *compañera solidaria* is to join the woman who is facing a situation of persistent violence precisely at the moment where she reaches out for help since at this stage the *compañeras solidaria* knows what governments instances must assist the woman who needs legal protection to interrupt this situation. She must make sure that the woman who fills up an official complaint receives proper assistance and attention from government authorities. This stage is meant to prevent the future victimization of women by ensuring that the person who denounces domestic violence is given adequate protection by government institutions.

The logic behind *acompañamiento* is to guaranty that the authorities give violence victims the expedited attention they need in a context where she feels that she is allowed to take the decisions that best suit her. The person who performs the role of *acompañamiento* must make sure that government authorities are not refusing to help victims of violence since this kind of assistance can signify life or death for some women.

The goal here is to be attentive and receptive to the concerns of hundreds of families who complained that police authorities refused to assist the families of Femicide and enforced disappearance victims. In this sense, the role of the *compañeras solidarias* is to guarantee that no woman is denied the assistance of the authorities whenever she decides to formally denounce her abuser. One thing that it is important to note is that the notion of assistance is not only limited to the legal aspect. Women who have suffered continuous episodes of violence are also provided with medical aid for her and her children in case they also need this type of attention. In most cases, it is procured that women who have experienced domestic violence receive medical attention at no cost since in most cases these women cannot afford the medical expenses for themselves or for their family. In other occasions, survivors of domestic violence are required to give a symbolic donation in exchange for the medical services that they receive.

The program of *compañeras solidarias* also seeks to prevent violence against women through empowerment. This task is done by instructing women victims of domestic violence that they have rights, which the government must guarantee.<sup>233</sup> This constitutes the next stage in the practice of *acompañamiento* since the program is not only meant to help and support victims of domestic violence in their most immediate needs. At the same time, the goal of this program is also to teach victims how to protect themselves by teaching them about their rights and guarantees. The end is also to teach practical skills to these women so that they learn to demand that their rights are properly observed. At the same time, participants in this program learn to help other women in

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<sup>233</sup> Biblioteca Jurídica Virtual del Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas de la UNAM. Protocolo para el Acompañamiento de las Mujeres Víctimas de Violencia de Género ante las Instancias de Justicia, 255

similar situations. This goal shows that *acompañamiento* is thought of from the standpoint of a collectivity, rather than from the standpoint of the individual.<sup>234</sup>

The next stage in the practice of *acompañamiento* is sensitive involvement, which calls attention to the fact that *acompañamiento* requires the cultivation of relations of care and friendship between the person who performs *acompañamiento* and the person who receives it. The idea is construct relationships of care and solidarity among women since in many instances the very nature of the problem that *compañeras solidarias* are called to perform lends itself to intimate conversations where it is almost impossible to remain untouched by the experiences of others. In that sense, *acompañamiento* is concerned with the idea of being sensible towards the interests and needs of the person who performs and receives assistance as well as towards other women who might find themselves immersed in similar situations.

*Acompañamiento* is thus a reciprocal process that involves self-disclosure, acts of caring, empathy, and responsiveness for the different parts involved in this process. This principles inform the construction of a friendly relationship whereby it is important to anticipate and respond to the needs of the other. It also entails sharing and expressing feelings of love in order to construct long-term relationships of friendship and care. Seen in these terms, *acompañamiento* not only aims to interrupt the violence that many women in Ciudad Juárez suffer on a daily basis. In fact, *acompañamiento* also emerges as a life affirming practice whereby one's personal safety and care is not an individual responsibility but a collective endeavor. As I will discuss below, *acompañamiento* shows how individuals interrelate and organize themselves in a society seriously damaged by

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<sup>234</sup> Mujeres por Mexico A.C., In conversation with the author. June 2012.

violence. The practice of *acompañamiento*, is not confined to the program of *compañeras solidarias*. To be sure, time and again, activists working on anti-femicide issues brought up this idea during our conversations, which indicates how important this notion of *acompañamiento* is. In what follows, I show how the practice of *acompañamiento* takes shape outside the realm of the anti-femicide activism.

### **The Social Production of Resistance**

Recuerdan a los suricatos?

Pues bien, para quien no los haya conocido a través de la televisión, les recuerdo que estos pequeños mamíferos viven como nosotros en el desierto y para poder sobrevivir se organizan en pequeños clanes, en el que unos juegan el papel de vigías del grupo y, para ello, están alertas día y noche. Esto permite que los otros miembros puedan hacer sus actividades.

Algo parecido es lo que nosotros tenemos que hacer [en Ciudad Juárez].<sup>235</sup>

Do you remember the meerkats?

Well, for those of you who have not seen them in television, I want to remind you that these small mammals live, like us, in the desert. In order to be able to survive they organize themselves in small clans, some of them play the role of group keepers, and stay alert day and night.

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<sup>235</sup> Myrna Pastrana, *Cuando las Banquetas Fueron Nuestras*. (México: DF., Ficticia, 2011), 41.

This allows the rest of the group to keep up with their routinely activities.

Something similar is what we have to do [in Ciudad Juárez]

Myrna Pastrana

Feminicidal and drug related violence in Ciudad Juárez has affected residents of the city in countless ways. Needless to say, femicide also affected the city as such, its neighborhoods, its institutions, and the social dynamics between residents. Because of this, new forms of collective behavior have to be developed to move, work, and live in the city. One key consequence of feminicidal and drug related violence has been that residents of the city have had to abandon their traditional space of isolation to come closer, talk to one another, and disclose personal information with one another to maintain a sense of trust and security. As I will show in this section, the practice of *acompañamiento* developed through various actions, situations, and people who wanted to find alternative ways to protect themselves from the violence. Because of this, new spaces of solidarity and resistance had to be developed to minimize the effects of the violence. In the process, residents of Juárez saw themselves in the need to abandon old forms of isolation to seek joint alliances that made life in the city not only possible but also more meaningful. What is important to notice is how the context of violence made people aware that they had to abandon the liberal idea of the autonomous individual and seek collective solutions to effectively respond to the violence.

One of these spaces was the neighborhood. Most neighborhoods in Ciudad Juárez became little units where residents had to come up with new strategies to protect one

another. Residents began to organize weekly meetings to decide a number of strategies that would help them to stay safe in a climate of corruption and impunity. This idea is well captured by Armida Valverde, the current principal of Prepa Altavista (Altavista high school) who explained how the intense violence restored week relations among neighbors and family members. I quote professor Valverde at length since her argument conveys this idea more clearly. As she explains:

Lo cierto es que nunca hubo una rendición por parte de la sociedad civil frente a la violencia. Si te ibas a tu casa, pero teníamos que seguir saliendo a comprar el mandado, o sea la vida cotidiana continuaba en otras condiciones, si quieres, con miedo pero continuaba. Lo que permite la resistencia son los vínculos que hay en el entramado social. Con esos vínculos te reunías. Si bien es cierto que ya no se podía ir a pachangear, pero luego te juntabas con ellos y te ibas con tu familia a comer... Inclusive comentábamos entre la gente que nos juntábamos como la violencia nos dio pauta a que regresáramos a reunirnos en familia. Tuvimos que preguntarnos cuanto tiempo íbamos a vivir, cuanto tiempo nos teníamos. Esta situación también que restituyo algunos lazos sociales y familiares que estaban un tanto maltrechos porque cobraste conciencia de que la vida se acababa y no porque no la tengamos siempre sino porque la misma situación de violencia dejó ver con mayor evidencia de que la vida se te podía terminar en cualquier momento. La tuya, la de tu familia y no sabias donde podría ser... entonces creo que algunos lazos que se estaban rotos se volvieron a unir.



Así como hay toda una serie de daños provocados, también permitió restituir entre los colonos y entre esa gente que decidió encerrarse en sus fraccionamientos... se empezaron a juntar primero para poner la reja y luego para mantener a una persona para que cuidara el vecindario y para poder pagarle. Pero luego ya fue salir por el cafecito, y luego alguien llegó con enchiladas y así las cosas se fueron convirtiendo en un espacio de convivencia. No solo se dio la situación de estar encerrados y atemorizados... después siguieron con lo demás. Después de ponerse de acuerdo sobre la reja, continuaron con el parquecito, etc. Es decir, la violencia también dio pauta para que la gente se diera cierta organización social... para que se re-establecieran o se empezaran vínculos que anteriormente estaban fragmentados o que no existían.

The truth is that the people in Ciudad Juárez never gave up completely to fear and violence. Yes, your natural tendency was to go home, but we had to go out to buy groceries. In other words, life had to go on even if it did under conditions of fear. Life had to go on. What allow resistance to happen is the relationships that you build with others. You got together with the people you had some kind of relationship. It is true that we did not party as we used to, but you still got together with friends, acquaintances, ore even your family... We used to talk amongst ourselves about how was it that the violence we experienced on a daily basis actually forced us to reunite with our family. Oftentimes we asked ourselves how much longer we would live, how much time we had to live with our families. This situation also reestablished some family and social bonds that were weak to

the extent that we regain an awareness that life could end at any moment, not because that is the natural course of life—but because of the violence that surrounded us. The violence made us aware that our life, or that of our family members, could end any moment... In that sense, the bonds that in the past were broken came together again.

Just like we experience many wrongs in our person, we were able to reconstitute some social bonds among neighbors and among the people who decided to shut themselves to other neighborhoods... People began to reach out to one another in order to build a gate to shield the neighborhood from the violence. Next, they organized neighborhood meetings to hire private security personnel to watch out the neighborhood. After that, people started to get together for coffee and the next thing they knew was that someone showed up with *enchiladas*. In this way, neighborhoods and ghettos became real common spaces where people got together. People decided to self-incarcerate because they were scared. However, after building a gate in the neighborhood, neighbors started to build recreation facilities and other common spaces. In other words, the violence also triggered collective organization. In this way, people reconstituted or built relationships that in the past were broken or non-existent.<sup>236</sup>

This brief, but revealing, reflection shows how the condition of vulnerability and precariousness far from further fragmenting social relations in fact reinforced them. As professor Valverde makes clear, residents in Ciudad Juárez came to the realization that

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<sup>236</sup> Armida Valverde, Prepa Altavista. In conversation with the author. July 2013.

the violence was not a private phenomenon that affected only “bad individuals.” On the contrary, they were confronted with the fact that the current situation of violence affected everyone. As professor Valverde noted, “there is no one in Juárez who has not been affected by the violence. The majority of those who were affected found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. What is clear, however, is that residents of Ciudad Juárez also came to the realization that life itself depended on the ties that each person built with others. Just like in the case of *compañeras solidarias*, residents were forced to unite themselves in order to address the problem of insecurity. They had to build strong “*vinculos*” (social ties) because life itself depended on the protection and trust that others could provide.

Cities formerly structured by global capitalism, author Susana Rotker suggests, have become more segregated, as inhabitants constructed barriers in search of greater security. High levels of criminality affected urban transformations, which in turn lead to new social practices.<sup>237</sup> While it may be expected that violence isolates and segregates people, what happened in Ciudad Juárez challenges the notion of segregation since in Ciudad Juárez resistance meant that in order to “segregate” or protect themselves from the violence, residents had first to organize collectively to make a decision on how to protect themselves. In that way, residents of Juárez arrived at the conclusion that survival depended on the relationships people built with one another. As journalist Irma Gonzalez explained:

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<sup>237</sup> Susana Rotker and Katherine Goldman, *Citizens of fear: Urban Violence in Latin America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

Por un lado, el vecino se obligo a organizarse en su propia comunidad o fraccionamiento para encerrarse. Crean murallas en sus colonias, en su cuadras, en su fraccionamiento pero aprenden a organizarse. La violencia te lleva a tener que tocarle la puerta al vecino que no sabias ni quien era para decirle dame tu firma para que cerremos juntos. Tenemos que actuar el bloque y vamos a hacerlo juntos. Ahí fueron los vecinos. Tenemos casi 300 fraccionamientos hechos islas en la ciudad. Esto no ha sido del todo positivo, por ejemplo, porque como no nos conocíamos, no sabíamos quienes éramos y ciertamente hubo fricciones hasta el punto de dispararse entre vecinos. No habíamos aprendido a convivir entre nosotros. Al mismo tiempo ha habido buenos experimentos, han habido fraccionamientos que están entrando en alianzas, ya se formo una red de vecinos que está trabajando de manera organizada.

While we may not call that resistance explicitly, a plethora of actors indeed resisted the violence. On the one hand, neighbors were obliged to organize in their own communities or neighborhoods. They created walls around their communities, streets, or residential areas, but they learned to organize themselves. The violence forces you to knock the door to your neighbor despite that you did not even know who he or she was, to tell her give me your signature so we build a gate to close the neighborhood. We have to act as a block and we're going to do this together. This was an initiative taken by neighbors themselves. We have nearly 300 residential areas, which are islands in the city. This has not always been positive. For example, because we did not know each other, we did not who

we were, and, of course, there was conflict to the point that some neighbors attempted to shot others [since they thought of them as intruders]. We hadn't learn to coexist with each other. At the same time, we have had good experiments. Some neighborhoods and residential areas have created alliances with others. They already organized a network of neighborhoods and they are working in collaboration.<sup>238</sup>

While the initial goal was to come together to find common strategies to shield themselves from the violence, in the process, however, community ties and relationships of solidarity were built among neighbors. Those who came together with the intention to build gates around the neighborhood to impede the circulation of strangers, later found themselves sharing common projects and interests. They shared meals, ideas, and even strategies of resistance. Similar to the program of *compañeras solidarias*, neighborhood-organizing became a reciprocal process involving self-disclosure, acts of caring, empathy, as well as responsiveness. Survival itself depended on others, not in the individually sought protections that each resident could find for him or herself. This experience shows how the liberal construction of autonomous individual collapses in cities of violence.<sup>239</sup>

Neighborhood-organizing also required the construction of care relationships. In some cases, though not always, neighbors found themselves sharing and expressing feelings of love which in turn led them to the construction of long-term relationships of

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<sup>238</sup> Irma Gonzalez, El Diario de Ciudad Juárez, In conversation with the author. July 2013.

<sup>239</sup> This experience challenges Arendt's claim that totalitarian systems work through the obliteration of the space of politics. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966).

friendship. These *vinculos* (social ties) allowed residents of Juárez to survive. Interestingly, this phenomenon also manifested itself in other spaces. For example journalist Irma Gonzales from *El Diario* also indicated how she and her colleagues were forced to come together to create a collective program, which goes by the name of *Red de Periodistas de Juárez* since this was the only alternative they had to protect themselves in the face of increasing state corruption and impunity. Their goal of the program was to serve as an open forum for journalists to talk about safety strategies within journalism. As a collective group, la *Red de Periodistas de Juárez* has maintained a close relationship with Human Rights organizations in order to exercise more pressure on the state and federal authorities to denounce state violations. In the words of Gonzalez, “the only way to protect ourselves is through the creation of *vinculos* “or interconnected ties with other organizations.”<sup>240</sup>

Gonzalez’s statement shows that collective ties and networks, not the state, provide them with some sort of protection against the violence. By focusing on the practice of *acompañamiento* is possible to understand that the state and its institutions undergo a deep crisis that speaks for the state’s incapacity, inability, or unwillingness to undermine the power of criminal organizations and/or transnational corporations. In some instances, as Susana Rotker contends, “it is not unheard of for organized neighborhoods to make deals with drug dealers to enforce some degree of order.”<sup>241</sup> Neighbors’ mistrust of the state points out to the failure of the state to contain competing forms of power within society like corporations or criminal organizations. Rather, *acompañamiento* reveals the crisis of the state, not in its particularity, as in the case of the Mexican state,

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<sup>240</sup> Gonzalez. In conversation with the author. July 2013.

<sup>241</sup> Rotker, *Citizens of Fear*, 4.

which, according to some critics is a failed state, but of the state as a mechanism of power in charge of managing and administering, other forms of power. It shows that the state participates in the regulation of struggles for recognition, distribution of resources, justice, rights, and security. But the practice of *acompañamiento* also reveals that the state is no longer effective in the management of contending forms of power that privilege some groups while rendering historically disposed populations even more vulnerable. On the contrary, in the words of Irma Gonzalez, “el enemigo no es el narcotráfico, es el estado (the enemy is not the drug traffickers, it is the state).”<sup>242</sup> This statement shows that the institutions of authority are in fact seen as prosecutors. Because of this, the struggle against violence in Ciudad Juárez is a struggle against a state whose incapacity or unwillingness to manage different forms of power has resulted in the infinite proliferation of violence that different forms of resistance in Ciudad Juárez seek to contain.

These multiple manifestations of resistance depend not on the state for protection and security but on the collective organization of neighbors and the mutual care that creates alternative forms of safety and protection. This is not to indicate that the state is not a significant actor, contending this would be, at best, naïve, and at worst irresponsible since the state continues to be the author of countless deaths in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mexico. At the same time, the state has adopted a project of mass incarceration of poor and brown bodies. The practice of *acompañamiento* has made this crisis visible by showing how individuals had to devise alternative strategies to mitigate the violence whose origin is found precisely in state institutions.

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<sup>242</sup> Gonzalez, in conversation with the author, July 2013.

Countless of times I have heard how journalists claim that residents of Ciudad Juárez have internalized the violence to a point that they are no longer able to let themselves be affected by it. Excessive social violence, it is argued, has been normalized. Yet, this argument presupposes that the state continues to perform its role of sovereign power and that people continue to believe that this is the case. Yet, what the 's example allows us to see is that this is far from the truth. Citizens pretend to have internalized the violence because the state pretends to function efficiently while in reality a whole new order of care and responsiveness among the people themselves is replacing it. As Rotker explains, “in the crisis of meaning produced by violence, spoken and marginalized forms of knowledge begin to weave new networks of representation that, ultimately, must be addressed—responded to.”<sup>243</sup>

### **An Ethic of Care**

Why is this practice of *acompañamiento* an ethic of care? In her 1998 article “An ethic of care” Joan C. Tronto describes an ethic of care as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”<sup>244</sup> This conception of an ethic of care, Tronto notes, highlights the fact that care is a “species activity” by which she means that care is one of those activities that make people human. Also relevant in Tronto’s definition is the idea that care is centered on *doing*. In other words, care is a

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<sup>243</sup> Rotker, *Citizens of Fear*, 10.

<sup>244</sup> Joan C. Tronto, “An ethic of care”. *Generations*. 22 (Fall, 1998): 16.



practice—that is, an action—and not merely a set of principles or rules. Finally, care is always geared towards improving the way people live. This of course is not meant in a prescriptive way since the demands for care as well as the understanding of what care entails depends on the specific context in which the demand arises, but the main goal is that care is always oriented towards living the good life. What is more, in Tronto’s conception, care is a spatial practice to the extent that care takes place in a variety of institutions and settings, including the household, the market, in the workings of bureaucratic organizations, hospitals, and in many other spaces.”<sup>245</sup>

Caring in Tronto’s framework involves four distinctive phases: 1) caring about, 2) caring for, 3) caregiving, and 4) care receiving. Caring about requires paying attention to the need for caring. This involves “listening to articulated needs, recognizing unspoken needs, distinguishing among and deciding which needs to care about. It requires attentiveness, that is, the capacity of being able to perceive needs.”<sup>246</sup> Caring for revolves around the need to have someone who directly takes on the responsibility to meet a need that has been identified. Needs require that someone assumes the responsibility for organizing, marshaling resources or personnel, and paying and/or providing for the care work that will meet the identified needs. Caregiving involves the actual material meeting of the caring need. It is when the care materializes through particular action performed by particular individuals and or institutions. Finally, care receiving “involves the response of the thing, person or group that receive the caregiving... It is the response to the care that has been given. Caregiving requires the complex moral element of responsiveness.”<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 16-17

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

The four phases of caring identified by Tronto show that this practice is indeed a complex collective process that involves a mutual relationship of care. At the same time, in Tronto's rendering, caring is a practice which can be equally performed by a plethora of institutions as she explains, "caring is a process that can occur in a variety of institutions and settings. Care is found in the household, in services and goods sold in the market, in the workings of bureaucratic organizations in contemporary life. Care is not restricted to the traditional realm of mother's work, to welfare agencies, or to hired domestic servants but is found in all of these realms. Indeed, concerns about care permeate our daily lives, the institutions in the modern marketplace, the corridors of government."<sup>248</sup>

This quote demonstrates that while caring can be a collective practice, this collectivity does not have to be meaningful in any way. What matters for Tronto is that the act of caring is oriented towards "maintaining, continuing, and repairing our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible." While it is desirable to cultivate meaningful relationships with one another, caring activities in Tronto's conception, do not necessitate the cultivation of interpersonal feelings such as love, friendship, or sympathy for the other. As long as it is oriented towards the enhancement of the good life, caring can be devoid of feelings and passions. In Ciudad Juárez, however, a sentient collectivity is not only important, but absolutely essential. Life itself depends on the cultivation of love and meaningful friendship since people's personal safety is entrusted to the other, something which cannot be done if doubts about who the neighbor—to whom people entrust their safety—really is. Because of this, the practice of *acompañamiento* does not make sense outside the cultivation of such feelings. Indeed, as Robyn Marasco has argued in a

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<sup>248</sup> Tronto, *An Ethic of Care*, 16.

different context, “still at the risk of seeming ridiculous, one cannot but concur with Che Guevara that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.”<sup>249</sup>

*Acompañamiento* in Ciudad Juárez is a practice that reveals how in order to exist and to be a resident of the city, Juárez’s inhabitants had to reject the liberal values of individualism and autonomy to remedy their precarious situation. Ironically, this implies that in order to reduce their vulnerability to violence—state and otherwise—residents of Ciudad Juárez have to recognize their own vulnerability and even augment it by getting closer to their neighbors with whom they needed to share personal information in order to maintain a certain sense of safety. These locally based alliances formed between neighbors to resist gender and drug related violence long with the militarization of the border have revealed the crisis of the state in its ability to administer competing forms of power that exist at the border. In fact, the logic of authority and criminality have turned upside down since the institutions of authority are in fact seen as prosecutors. For this reason *acompañamiento* has become an essential ethic of care. *Acompañamiento*, thus, shows an image of Ciudad Juárez that reveals at once landscapes of violence, human tragedy, and melodrama as well as resistance. Thus, attending to questions of space, place, and territory is crucial because resistance takes place in a particular space and time; namely, in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, poor shantytowns or *colonias*, art studios, media spaces, etc.

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<sup>249</sup> Che Guevara as quoted in Robyn Marasco, “I would rather wait for you than believe that you are not coming at all!: Revolutionary love in a post-revolutionary time,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 36 (June, 2010): 644. Che Guevara’s exact words are: “déjeme decirle algo aunque le pueda parecer ridículo. Un revolucionario verdadero esta guiado por grandes sentimientos de amor, a la humanidad, amor a la justicia y a la verdad. Es imposible pensar que un revolucionar autentico sin esta cualidad. [Let me tell you something even though it may sound ridiculous. A true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. Love for humanity, love for justice and love for truth. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality. See Guevara’s words in Portavoz, “Escribo Par con R de Revolución.”

## CHAPTER 6

### FEMINICIDE AND THE *FUNERALIZATION* OF THE CITY: INTERROGATING THE AGENCY OF MATERIAL OBJECTS IN POLITICS

To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past.<sup>250</sup>

- Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of Landscape"

#### Introduction

"This silence terrifies me... no one is protesting. There are no press conferences, no marches. It's like we're back in 1993."<sup>251</sup> Ester Chávez Cano confided these words to her close friend Melissa W. Wright in 2007. For the activist and founder of Casa Amiga, the first help center for victims of violence, the situation in Ciudad Juárez was alarming. Young women disappeared in plain daylight, female homicides increased steadily, and the authorities overlooked the crimes. Furthermore, the days when women used to take to

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<sup>250</sup> Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25 (Oct., 1993), pp. 152-174

<sup>251</sup> Melissa W. Wright, "Urban Geography Plenary Lecture - Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico." *Urban Geography*. 28 (May, 2007): 401.

the streets to protest feminicide<sup>252</sup> not only once or twice but even three times in a single day seemed over.<sup>253</sup> Wright's response did not sound any better as she explained that, "no one, anywhere, protests violence against women on a regular basis."<sup>254</sup> This brief exchange between Ester Chávez Cano and Melissa Wright illustrates one of the central premises held in protest politics literature: "that political protest is performed through the body."<sup>255</sup> Yet, what happens when human bodies do not or cannot carry on the protests? Can material objects participate in political protest? Are they part of the political?

Whereas most of the existing narratives that describe the present history of Ciudad Juárez emphasize the context of intense violence, an important trajectory of protest and collective organization exists in the city. Since the early nineties mothers of feminicide victims, women's organizations, activists, human rights defenders, and protestors in general have used the material body to raise awareness about the increasing murders of women, denounce government impunity, and demand justice. They have participated in public marches, press conferences, artistic performances, building occupations, public confrontations with government officials, national and international caravans, and many more.<sup>256</sup> Thus, while Ciudad Juárez has been exceptionally violent over the last two decades, the city has also produced a plethora of innovative practices of resistance that seek to denounce and contest such violence. Not all of these practices, however, have been performed through the human body. In fact, a unique modality of

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<sup>252</sup> Fregoso, "Witnessing," 8; Fregoso and Bejarano, eds., *Terrorizing Women*, 3-8.

<sup>253</sup> On the frequency of women's protests, see the interview with Dr. Julia Monárrez Frago, a researcher at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Ciudad Juárez. This interview can be found at <http://proyectocuerpodemujerpeligrode muerte.wordpress.com/2013/07/05/mapa-del-feminicidio-en-america-latina-2013/>.

<sup>254</sup> Wright, "Urban Geography Plenary Lecture," 401.

<sup>255</sup> Barbara Sutton, *Bodies in Crisis: Culture, Violence, and Women's Resistance in Neoliberal Argentina*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 172.

<sup>256</sup> Wright, "Plenary Lecture," 402. See also my discussion in the preceding chapters.

protest has emerged whereby material objects like pink crosses, graffiti paintings, anti-femicide monuments, *poemantas*,<sup>257</sup> and *pesquisas*<sup>258</sup> have fashioned the spatial transformation of the city, giving it a funeral like appearance in an attempt to make visible the impunity of the crimes.

In this chapter, I discuss a practice that I call the *funeralization* of the city. This unique modality of protest began when Paula Flores—the mother of a femicide victim—painted a black cross in a lamppost outside the police station where she attempted to file a disappearance report days after her daughter Sagrario went missing. She did this to protest police negligence since police officers refused to help her. To be sure, Sagrario’s dead body was found weeks later, showing signs of rape, torture, and extreme violence. From this moment on Paula Flores, alongside other mothers of femicide and disappearance victims, launched a cross campaign, which consisted on painting black crosses on pink backgrounds in electric and telephone poles to keep the memory of the crimes alive. This material aspect of the protests informs my account of the *funeralization* of the city defined as the process whereby protestors reappropriate and mobilize material objects to represent femicidal violence and to raise public awareness about government negligence that produces the impunity of perpetrators. I argue that the material objects mobilized in the anti-femicide protests are not mere instruments but contain an agency that coexists alongside the human one that originally brought them into being since they embody the injustice done to the murdered and disappeared women.

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<sup>257</sup> *Poemantas* are big billboards printed with poems that speak of love, peace, and friendship.

<sup>258</sup> *Pesquisas* denotes an investigation, search, or inquiry. *Pesquisas* are one page photographs that people print to demand information about a missing person. These *pesquisas* list the physical characteristics of the missing person: height, weight, eyes color, hair color, etc., and, occasionally, they offer a ransom in exchange for information.

In what follows, I provide an account of *the funeralization of the city* to provoke some reflections about the agency of material objects like pink crosses, graffiti paintings, monuments, *poemantas*, and *pesquisas*. How do material objects contribute to the anti-femicide protests? Is this contribution political? Are material objects vehicles or agents of resistance? This chapter brings into conversation protest politics and new materialist ontology literature to interrogate the agency of non-human beings or material objects. In doing so, I contribute to recent attempts by Marisol de la Cadena, Judith Butler, and Jane Bennett to rethink a more horizontal mode of agency that grants non-human beings an active and productive power of their own.<sup>259</sup> I illustrate the agency of material objects in Ciudad Juárez through an analysis of pink crosses, anti-femicide graffiti, monuments, *poemantas* and *pesquisas*.

The chapter is organized as follows. In the first section, I introduce the topic of femicide in Ciudad Juárez, discussing how since 1993 dead bodies turned up in public spaces, blurring the boundaries between the death and the living. I offer an overview of the objects that anti-femicide protestors deployed to make this phenomenon visible. In the second section, I discuss recent literature that addresses the relationship between non-human bodies and political protest to show how an increasing number of scholars in different fields are attempting to theorize a more horizontal mode of agency that is attentive to the inclusion of non-human bodies and materialities traditionally rendered unintelligible as political agents. Finally, I conclude this chapter by discussing the agency of pink crosses, anti-femicide graffiti and monuments, *poemantas*, and *pesquisas*.

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<sup>259</sup> See in particular, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1; Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," *Transversal* (September, 2011). Online edition. This article can be consulted at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>; Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond "Politics." *Cultural Anthropology*. 25.

While I examine the agency of material objects in political protest, I do not contend that such objects *replace* human bodies in the art of protest. My goal is rather to interrogate the commonplace assumptions that the excess of violence quells political protest, that political protest is only rendered intelligible if performed through the human body, and, by extension, that spatial and material objects can only instrumentally participate in political protest. Although it is true that most protests are carried out through human bodies, recent protest politics literature has begun decentering protestors themselves in favor of analyses that look at the technological, material, and spatial conditions that make public assembly possible.<sup>260</sup> This chapter contributes to political theory and protest politics discussions regarding the agency of material objects by adding a contemporary perspective coming from the anti-femicide protests in Latin America.

### **Femicide, the Public life of Dead Bodies, and the *Funeralization* of the City**

As explained above, femicide, according to professor Julia E. Monárrez is an analytical category that describes the killings of women observed in Ciudad Juárez since 1993. Recall that Monárrez explained that the history behind this term involves the combination of three main elements. First, the fact that these women were snatched in plain daylight and taken to a place where they were sexually abused, tortured, mutilated, and discarded in the desert, empty lots, and other public spaces. This type of violence, she said, is not exclusive of Ciudad Juárez, however what is particular to the city's context is that it

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<sup>260</sup> See for instance Butler, "Bodies in Alliance;" De la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics;" and Jeff S. Juris, "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation." *American Ethnologist*. 39 (February, 2012): 259-279.



happened in the context of widespread impunity. Second, feminist literature, through the authorship of Diane Russell, had already created the concept *femicide* to describe “the killing of females by males *because* they are female.”<sup>261</sup> This concept has been reworked by a group of academics and activists to reflect the context of Ciudad Juárez. Finally, she says, “since the very beginning we saw a protest movement that expands its reach from the local to the global arena to make feminicide visible.”<sup>262</sup>

The protest movement, as Monárrez rightly notes, has played a fundamental role in the process of making feminicide visible. However, material objects have also contributed to this process by giving Ciudad Juárez a funeral appearance in order to show the scope of the violence against women and the overwhelming culture of impunity surrounding the crimes. As I described earlier, since 1993 female corpses began to appear among the living. Originally, feminicide victims were tossed in remote places away from the city, including Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, and poor *colonias* built outside Juárez. Yet, in recent years women’s dead bodies were found on the streets, in public plazas, or residential areas. These injured bodies were no longer confined to the distant walled spaces of the cemetery. Rather, they seemed to be moving nearer into the public spaces of the city. As journalist Sandra Rodriguez Nieto explains, “the whole city became a dumpster of dead bodies.”<sup>263</sup>

Women’s corpses, their wounds, blood, smell, and mutilated flesh invaded the spaces of the living and even though police and forensic authorities quickly removed them from public sight, mothers and relatives started to paint cross monuments in memory of the victims. In this way, black and pink crosses became a distinctive part of

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<sup>261</sup> Russell, “Origin and Importance.”

<sup>262</sup> Monárrez, in conversation with the author, August, 13, 2013.

<sup>263</sup> Rodriguez Nieto, *Fabrica*, 36.

the city's landscape, which reflected the large number of femicide crimes left unresolved by state authorities. Protestors used all sorts of objects to call people's attention to the alarming increase of femicide cases, including graffiti, memorials, written poems, and photographs of the victims. These objects made femicide visible in Ciudad Juárez despite repeated attempt at concealing it. Wooden sticks, pink and black paint, iron nails, paper, photographs, and gluing tape combined to bring back the presence of the victims to the city. In doing so, these objects gave Ciudad Juárez a funeral-like aspect as a form of indictment against the political class that tolerates enabled gender structural violence.

This unique modality of protest started when Paula Flores and members of the organization that she helped to create in 1998, Voces sin Eco (Voices Without Echo) organized to launch a cross campaign in support of their quest for justice. This campaign consisted in painting black crosses in telephone and electrical poles in downtown Juárez (see figure 3 in the Appendix: Objects of Resistance). Members of this organization also began to plant pink crosses in the desert, empty lots, or wastelands where dead women and girls were found. When it was possible to identify the victim, the crosses showed her name written in black and white letters. In addition, two cross-monuments were built in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua city to symbolize the permanency of the anti-femicide struggle, which will only end, according to activist Irma Campos, "the day when every single femicide case has been resolved."<sup>264</sup>

These crosses gained prominence as an anti-femicide symbol in 2002 when a coalition of activists formed to inaugurate the *Éxodo por la Vida: ¡Ni una Mas!* (Exodus for Life: Not one More) Campaign" to protest the discovery of eight female corpses in an

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<sup>264</sup> Irma Campos, Comunicado "Éxodo por la Vida: Ni una Mas." (March 2002).

empty lot called *Campo Algodonero* (Cotton Field). After the horrific discovery, the mothers of the victims, activists, feminists, women and human rights organizations took to the streets wearing black tunics and pink hats chanting *¡Ni una Mas! ¡Ni una Mas!* to denounce what was happening in Juárez. One of the key features of this Campaign was precisely to install two permanent cross monuments—one located nearby the Santa Fe International Bridge in Ciudad Juárez and one at the Plaza Hidalgo located in front of the State Capitol in Chihuahua City as a reminder that feminicide crimes were not investigated. The cross monument in Chihuahua City was decorated with torn clothing, victims' photographs, and 260 nails representing each of the women murdered in Juárez since 1993 (see figure 4). The one placed in Juárez had 266 nails because six more women were killed in the process of transporting the cross to Juárez to be installed next to the Santa Fe Bridge in 2002. Both contained a legend that reads: *¡Ni una Mas!* (see figure 5).

In addition to the pink crosses, other material objects have been used in memory of feminicide victims. For example, the sculpture *Flor de Arena* (Sand Flower) designed by the renown Chilean artist Veronica Leiton to honor the victims (see figure 6). The sculpture was placed in Campo Algodonero (The Cotton Field), the place where eight female corpses were found in November 2001. Next to the monument stands the iconic pink cross, as a tribute to and recognition of the mothers' cross campaign for justice. The names of seven of the victims in Campo Algodonero are engraved on a memory wall as a way of remembering them. The sculpture's pedestal, shaped like a desert rose, is transformed into a female figure in which fifteen roses strewn across her full-length gown

symbolizes 100 women; a petal from the desert rose turns into a swirling mantle which bears the reoccurring given-name of fifteen hundred women and girls.<sup>265</sup>

*Pesquisas* are other objects that mothers and families of the victims use to represent the violence. These are single page fliers that show a photograph of the victims and the legend “*se busca*” (missing). Mothers and relatives of femicide and disappearance victims attach these fliers to street walls and commercial establishments in downtown Juárez hoping to gather information concerning the missing person (see figures 7, 8, 9). Graffiti is another important device used to denounce femicidal violence, government corruption, and impunity. These graffiti paintings decorate dozens of abandoned and ruined houses portraying Juárez as a wounded city in need of healing (See figure 11). Messages representing peace, women’s rights, democracy, and solidarity are found everywhere in the paintings that decorate the city. While the style, composition, and message of graffiti paintings varies, many of them show phrases like “*paz en Ciudad Juárez*” (peace in Ciudad Juárez); or “*respeto a las mujeres*” (show respect for women).<sup>266</sup>

Anti-femicide protests have also left their marks on walls, bridges, and buildings’ facades. In these places, one witnesses people’s efforts to reclaim their city. A unique way of doing this has been through the mobilization of *poemantas*: the public display of huge billboards where people print poems on peace, love, and solidarity. The public display of *poemantas* sought to challenge a typical form of communication among the rivaling drug cartels that sent each other’s messages through *narcomantas*. At the

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<sup>265</sup> Veronica Lieton as quoted in Fregoso 2012. At the time of the monument’s construction, the figures collected by the organizations indicated that the number of murdered and disappeared women totaled about 1500.

<sup>266</sup> Author’s translation.

peak of drug-related violence, the city witnessed mass executions that filled the city with dead bodies. Next to the corpses, residents of Juárez would also find the typical *narcomanta*: posters containing threatening messages directed towards the military, police forces, or members of the rival drug cartel. In contrast, anti-femicide protestors started to print *poemantas* (as opposed to *narcomantas*) that they hang on bridges and buildings' facades, calling for peace and the end of violence (see figure 12).

Together, these material objects provide a visual representation of the violence against women in Ciudad Juárez challenging the official narrative that denies that poor woman and girls face a particular threat of violence. At the same time, they help to keep the memory of the crimes alive as members of the organization, *Mujeres de Negro*, explained at the ceremony organized to install the cross monument in Chihuahua city in 2002. In their words, “with this cross we want that the untimely death of 287 women are not forgotten, but remain in the collective memory.”<sup>267</sup> These material objects also help to create bounds of solidarity between the people who protest the violence. But while black and pink crosses, graffiti paintings, anti-femicide monuments, *poemantas*, and *pesquisas* have been mobilized to counter the narratives that deny the existence of femicide, is it possible to also claim that pink crosses are agential beings? To what extent can political protest be performed through material objects? A revitalized interest in political protest has developed in the wake of the Arab Spring, Europe's anti-austerity demonstrations, and the #Occupy movements in the United States.<sup>268</sup> This literature examines the old/new features of contemporary protests, their democratic/anti-democratic

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<sup>267</sup> Olga Aragon “Mujeres de Negro’ Exigen que los Crimenes no Pasen al Olvido: Instalan Nueva Cruz,” *El Diario*, August, 8, 2002.

<sup>268</sup> Butler, “Bodies”; Juris, “Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere”; Marina Sitrin, *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina*, (London: Zed Books, 2012).

ethos, the presence/absence of political demands, its conservative/progressive nature, the subjectivities these protests produce, and the material conditions that enable public assembly. In most cases, however, this literature has failed to theorize the centrality of material objects in the rise and continuation of political protests, with some important exceptions as I explain next.

### **The Politics of Materiality: Rethinking the Agency of Pink Crosses**

Protest politics literature has, for a long time, held one premise that is widely accepted: protests are about human bodies congregating, moving, and speaking together.<sup>269</sup> Mass uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, Spain, the US, Turkey, Brazil, and many other places in the world seem to confirm this rule, namely, that “political resistance involves, *first and foremost*, putting the material body in action to affect the course of society.”<sup>270</sup> In turn, the absence of human bodies taking to the streets suggests that protest activity is weak or nonexistent. But, is it? While I don’t dispute the view that human bodies are central to protests of any sort, I consider that the human body is not the only being capable of exercising agency in political protest. Since the early 1990s, protest activity in Ciudad Juárez took the form of public marches, press conferences, artistic performances, building occupations, and public confrontations with government officials.<sup>271</sup> The victims’ mothers together with several women’s organizations, and prominent activists led the protests and vowed to keep demonstrating until feminicides were properly

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<sup>269</sup> Butler, “Bodies”; Barbara Sutton, *Bodies in Crisis: Culture, Violence, and Women's Resistance in Neoliberal Argentina*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 161-190.

<sup>270</sup> Sutton, *Bodies in Crisis*, 161, 172, emphasis added.

<sup>271</sup> Wright, “Urban Geography Plenary Lecture,” 402.

investigated and perpetrators were brought to justice. Material objects, however, played an important role in the protests alongside human bodies. Yet, as Jean Bennett rightly notes, it is often the case that things or materialities, as she calls them, “usually figure as inanimate objects, passive utilities, occasional interruptions, or background context.”<sup>272</sup> In contrast, active and creative power is always imagined as human.

The pink crosses are a clear example of this tendency to imagine things as passive and inert objects, but, as Bennett notes, things are also actants. She defines an actant as “a source of action that can be either human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events. It is ‘any entity that modifies another entity in a trial,’ something whose ‘competence is deduced from its performance’ rather than posited in advance of the action.”<sup>273</sup> The term *actant*, as this definition shows, denotes a sort of agency that can be human or non-human. It reflects the capacity of things to “do” something, to produce effects, or to combine with other forms of power to produce change. Looking at things in this light is important because it helps us to account for forms of agency that are not completely reducible to the human, but are the result of the combined actions and effects of human and non-human beings as in the case of the pink crosses and the other material objects that I have been discussing here.

The crosses used in the anti-femicide protests, for instance, are automatically equated with Mexico’s religious tradition but they are rarely granted an agency of their own. To be sure, in Mexican religious culture, the cross is a symbol of life in death. For

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<sup>272</sup> Gulshan Ara Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett.” In Browning, Gary K., Raia Prokhovnik, and Maria Dimova-Cookson ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Political Theorists*, (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 43.

<sup>273</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

the historian Claudio Lomnitz, the cross is a central component of the burial practices. It is a symbol of eternal life in the Christian tradition where life in Christ triumphs over death.<sup>274</sup> In turn, author Rosa Linda Fregoso writes that the pink cross is a religious symbol that moralizes and legitimizes social and human rights struggles at the U.S.-Mexico border. As she suggests, the pink cross is “part of a broader tradition of ‘religious-based morality’ evident in political protests on the US/ Mexico border.”<sup>275</sup>

What we see here is that both Lomnitz and Fregoso situate the cross in a broader tradition of religious inspired politics that uses symbols and rituals from Mexican catholic traditions in campaigns for human rights and social justice. The problem with this description is, however, that the pink cross is discussed as a religious object used for political purposes that men and women may have, but the cross itself is never granted any sort of political agency. Through the cross, Fregoso notes, religious themes and objects are incorporated into the protests as a means to give more legitimacy and visibility to struggles against violence. While cognizant of the significance invested in the pink cross, this statement nonetheless shows that the cross is never considered an *actant*.

That pink crosses are interpreted as a catholic symbol that enhances political protest should not be surprising since protest literature itself has hitherto privileged human bodies as the only vehicle for political protest. But while it is true that most protests are made possible through human bodies, recent trends in the protest politics literature are increasingly decentering the body while at the same time recognizing the

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 280.

<sup>275</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, “‘We Want Them Alive!’: The Politics and Culture of Human Rights,” *Social Identities*, 12 (2006): 123.



significance of technological, spatial, and material objects in protests.<sup>276</sup> Few authors have taken this challenge seriously, but Marisol de la Cadena, Judith Butler, and Jean Bennett are three prominent scholars whose recent work is making insightful efforts to theorize a more horizontal mode of agency that also takes into account the agency of non-human beings. In her analysis of the indigenous protests that erupted in 2006 to protect a mountain named Ausangate in Cuzco's main square, the *Plaza de Armas*, anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena argues for the agency of non-human beings.<sup>277</sup> Particularly central for De la Cadena are earth beings such as landscapes, mountains, rivers, the earth, and so on. What is chiefly interesting is de la Cadena's insistence that earth beings are also political beings who have "the capacity to significantly disrupt prevalent political formations, and reshuffle hegemonic antagonisms."<sup>278</sup>

De la Cadena's theoretical contribution consists in deconstructing the Western colonial project that managed to portray indigenous practices as "savage" customs in order to legitimize their destruction. Indigenous practices that grant earth beings a more active role in the realm of politics were negated through a process whereby political matters were ascribed to human beings alone while science was said to deal with nature. De la Cadena attempts to resurrect<sup>279</sup> the indigenous cosmology by inviting us "to take seriously (perhaps literally) the presence in politics of those actors, which, being other

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<sup>276</sup> Butler, "Bodies;" Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond "Politics." *Cultural Anthropology*. 25 (2010): 334-370; Jeff S. Juris, "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation". *American Ethnologist*. 39 ((2012): 259-279.

<sup>277</sup> De la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics," 338.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, 336.

<sup>279</sup> My use of the term resurrect here is meant to suggest that the negation of indigenous practices and cosmology amounts to what film theorist Jalal Toufic calls a surpassing disaster and the withdrawal of tradition. Surpassing disasters, he notes, are very rare kinds of disasters which nonetheless exist and can be identified not by the number of casualties or the scope of destruction but by the withdrawal of tradition that is no longer available and need to be resurrected by the artist, theorist, filmmaker and so on. See Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Pass a Surpassing Disaster*, (Forthcoming Books, 2009).

than human, the dominant disciplines assigned either to the sphere of nature (where they were to be known by science) or to the metaphysical and symbolic fields of knowledge.” Yet, earth practices, she notes, “have been increasingly frequent presences on political stages in the Andes.”<sup>280</sup> This quote shows how important is for De la Cadena to make room for “earth beings” in politics. While de la Cadena is silent about the agency of material objects in politics, her analysis is nonetheless important because she invites us to consider agency from the standpoint of beings other than human which opens the door for analyses that incorporate all kinds of beings.

Judith Butler offers a similar argument with respect to material environments. She situates her analysis in the midst of the Occupy Movement in the United States, which gave her the grounds to address the significance of material environments in her recent reflections about mass protests in Egypt. In “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” Butler writes: “we miss something of the point of public demonstrations when we fail to see that the very public character of the space is being disputed and even fought over when the crowds gather.”<sup>281</sup> Here, Butler’s central argument is that “public space and location are created through plural action.”<sup>282</sup> For her, political action is a collective endeavor and any protesting collectivity, she claims, has an intimate relationship to space and materiality, for this is precisely what public assembly produces: the public character of space and the material support for action.

Butler’s argument about the centrality of space and materiality is developed through a critique of Arendt’s conception of the space of appearance, which, she says, is

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 336-337.

<sup>281</sup> Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” *Transversal* (September, 20110). Online edition. This article can be consulted at: <http://eipep.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

blind to those conditions that make political action possible. From Butler's perspective, all action needs certain support because human beings do not act alone; they rely on space and material environments to support an acting collectivity. In other words, Butler's point is that the public character of space is both used and produced when bodies come together to make claims. As such, material environments are not only part of the struggles and contestations that constitute the political; "they themselves act when they become the support for action."<sup>283</sup> This point is of outmost importance because it helps us to rethink the existing theory of public action. Political action, for Butler, is not only defined by what people do. Of course, it matters to her what kinds of actions people take to protest and to act collectively. Yet, she claims that it is equally important to ask: how do people act; what available means do they have to act; and what is being demanded through political action? Her answer to these questions is that space and material environments are key supports for action, but they also constitute that for which protesters are fighting for in the first place, as for example when struggles develop to demand safer streets for women or gender and sexual minorities, better working facilities, hospitals, etc.<sup>284</sup>

In this respect, it is central for Butler that any theory of human action accounts "for the ways in which the established architecture and topographies of power act upon us, and enter into our very action sometimes foreclosing our entry into the political sphere."<sup>285</sup> But even if Butler begins to ascribe a more important role to material environments, as she calls them, she still gives priority to human bodies as acting bodies in political protest. In Butler's own words, "political claims are made by bodies as they

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

appear and act, as they refuse, and as they persist under conditions in which that fact alone is taken to be an act of delegitimation of the state.”<sup>286</sup> Thus, while Butler does acknowledge the power of non-human bodies, she does not challenge the preeminence of human body in political protest, since, for her, the very notion of politics is constructed on the basis of the human body, and more particularly, on its precariousness and vulnerability *vis-a-vis* the other.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett takes a step further to pursue “a philosophical project and... a political one”<sup>287</sup> that takes seriously the idea that material things have a vital force. Bennett’s political project is to destabilize *human hubris*: the notion that human beings possess an absolute superiority over seemingly inert and passive matter. For her, “things... not only impede the will and designs of humans, but also act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”<sup>288</sup> This thought provoking idea opens up a space for political theorists to consider the possibility that material objects, such as the pink crosses that has been discussing here, have a more active role in public life.<sup>289</sup> Materialities, or more precisely, things, have oftentimes been described as inanimate or passive objects whereas human beings are imagined as active and creative beings. Thus, the goal for Bennett is not merely to claim that material objects can act *politically*. Bennett’s project is more radical in the sense that she stresses the fact that human beings and thinghood overlap: even human beings are “matter” in the sense that they have bones, water, and energy running through them.

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<sup>286</sup> Butler, “Bodies in Alliance.”

<sup>287</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid. viii.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, 2.

As I discussed earlier, Bennett's project attempts to horizontalize the relationship and interactions between human and non-human beings by portraying matter as vibrant, vital, energetic, quivering, and vibratory. In this respect, Bennett's theorization of things as *actants* is insightful because she refuses to see materialities as passive, death matter incapable of acting by its own accord. Again, the claim is not that things have more agency or power than humans do. Rather, the point for Bennett is that human and non-human entities or beings form an assemblage of active forces that produce certain effects. This does not imply that agency is equally exercised by diverse *actants*. The point is simply to understand that agency is not an exclusive human attribute and therefore denied to other beings that share the world with us.

The political implication of this claim in this discussion of material objects in Ciudad Juárez to protest femicide is that these material objects have an agency that cannot be simply subsumed or absorbed into the human. It is false that anti-femicide memorials, pink crosses, graffiti paintings, cross-monuments, and *pesquisas* can only instrumentally participate in political protests since they can, and have, produced certain effects even when human bodies do not, or cannot, carry on the protests. This supports Bennett's claim that, "things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power."<sup>290</sup> In this sense, protest politics literature needs to account for all forms of agency that participate in political acts of resistance that cannot simply be attributed to the human. To be sure, the crosses, graffiti paintings, cross-monuments, *poemantas*, and *pesquisas* have been essential in the process of transforming the city, giving it a cemetery-like appearance to make visible gender-based violence when such violence has been systematically denied by the authorities.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid, 3.

The crosses alongside the other objects that funeralize the city are a distinctive feature of the struggle against the crimes according to Irma Campos, former activist and member of the organization Mujeres de Negro. These objects represent the current context of violence in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua city.<sup>291</sup> The crosses also reveal that the boundaries that separate the living from the dead in Ciudad Juárez no longer hold since female corpses appeared in public spaces within the city and never again abandoned the public sphere. As such, the pink crosses are a tangible evidence that since 1993 Ciudad Juárez was becoming a dumpster of dead bodies despite the fierce campaign by government officials to deny the reality of femicide.<sup>292</sup> While government officials maintained that the killings were “normal” incidents that happen in any big city, the crosses showed that gender-based violence in Juárez grew in alarming proportions. Artists Rigo Maldonado and Victoria Delgadillo neatly captured the power of the crosses when they recalled the effects of seeing the crosses and *pesquisas* during their first visit to Juárez. The pink crosses found in telephone and electric poles, as well as the hundreds of *pesquisas* made the artists realize that the killings were not an urban legend, but a shocking reality. In Maldonado’s own words:

Telephone poles were painted with black crosses on pink backgrounds. Some were barely noticeable, while others seemed freshly painted. One for each girl or woman who had died, we were told. As people went on with their daily activities, these crosses stood out. Along with the crosses, I noticed posters of missing girls.

The handwriting said it all: *Se busca* or *La han visto?*... The crosses and posters

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<sup>291</sup> Campos, “Éxodo.”

<sup>292</sup> Rodríguez Nieto, *Fabrica*, 36.

made an inexplicable impact on me. I could not concentrate on why I was in Juárez, only on the crosses and the young girls' faces. I then realized that this was no longer a legend: it was *true*, in fact, that women were disappearing en masse in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>293</sup>

As this passage shows, the pink crosses and *pesquisas* have the power to communicate the scope of the tragedy in Juárez. After this trip, Maldonado was unable to ignore the situation and so he, together with several other artists, prepared the *Hijas de Juárez* exhibit to tell the world about the growth of gender-based violence in Juárez. It is important however to recognize that this power to communicate and make femicide visible is not only exercised through human bodies. The crosses, *pesquisas*, graffiti paintings, sculptures, and so on have an agency that cannot simply pass as human. To recognize this agency it is important to conceive of agency not merely in human terms but, as Bennett suggests, as an assemblage of human and non human, of physiological, physical, and technological elements.<sup>294</sup>

The crosses displayed in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua show that the impunity of the crimes continues. Likewise, the two cross-monuments serve as a permanent indictment against the institutions that tolerated gender-based violence through their omission. Ironically, the cross monument in Chihuahua City was set on fire after its public exhibition presumably by some individuals who thought that the cross was damaging the image of the city. Despite this, a new cross-monument was immediately

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<sup>293</sup> Victoria Delgadillo and Rigo Maldonado, "Journey to the Land of the Dead: A Conversation with the Curators of the Hijas de Juárez Exhibition," *AZTLAN - A Journal of Chicano Studies* 28 (2003): 181. Emphasis added.

<sup>294</sup> Khan, "Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency," 44.

ordered and put on display in the same place.<sup>295</sup> While we might think that these material objects are mere instruments that protestors use in their activism, this is clearly not the case. As Maldonado's testimony above makes clear, material objects like the crosses and *pesquisas* embody the presence of the victims, showing not only the original act of violence perpetrated against women but also how this original act of violence has been amplified by the government's attempt to deny or silence such acts of violence.

Material objects are more than mere vehicles of political protest. To be sure, when I asked one of the activists about the meaning of the cross monuments she replied that the crosses are central for the movement because "the mothers of the victims vowed to carry on the protests and to denounce femicide as long as they live. However, when the mothers themselves die or suffer state's repression the cross monuments will continue to protest the political system that allowed such an injustice to happen"<sup>296</sup> Like the pink crosses, *pesquisas* are another powerful form to denounce the disappearance of women and girls in Ciudad Juárez. In parallel with female femicide and female enforced disappearances, the city center started to be filled with *pesquisas*. As I explained earlier, *pesquisas* are small fliers that show the photographs of the missing women. The mothers and relatives of femicide victims attach them to walls, electric and telephone poles, food carts, and sign posts in downtown Juárez.

These portraits are distributed with the aim of finding information about the missing person's whereabouts. Almost every single wall in the city center has dozens of these small *pesquisas* showing the faces of the missing women and girls. Although these photographs are oftentimes removed from the walls or destroyed, the overwhelming

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<sup>295</sup> Ramos Carrasco 2006, *Memorias*, 56.

<sup>296</sup> Linda Flores, *Por un Chihuahua Libre y sin Temor*, A.C., In conversation with the author. July 2012.



number of *pesquisas* creates a visual map of the places where most women “disappeared.” These female faces reflected in the hundreds of *pesquisas* slowly began to change the face of Ciudad Juárez, due to the absence of hundreds of women and girls who may be kept in captivity, tortured, and finally killed by her captors. *Pesquisas* show that women’s enforced disappearance is quite common in Ciudad Juárez. They make visible the absence of women from the maquiladoras, streets, work places, homes, and bus stops.<sup>297</sup> In other words, *pesquisas* materialize the abstract phenomenon of enforced disappearance by revealing the concrete faces of the women who suffered this experience. Politically speaking, *pesquisas* also represent the continuous and escalating gender-based violence amid public policies that ignore this phenomenon while prioritizing the war against drugs.

The overwhelming number of *pesquisas* attached to walls in the city show the gravity of the problem in Juárez, for one sees not only one or two *pesquisas*, but hundreds of them. Looking at these female portraits is overwhelming and unsettling. *Pesquisas* not only communicate that someone’s daughter, sister, girlfriend, mother, or friend is missing. They also compel passers by to act by asking them to provide information on the whereabouts of the person in question. And yet, they compel spectators still in a different way, for implicitly, they ask, how can anyone maintain a straight face while aware that the faces of many young girls are missing from the city? The faces in the *pesquisas* ask us to save them, but the persistence of these *pesquisas* in downtown Juárez also ask spectators to resist the normalization of a situation whereby young women and girls disappear from the city. Through these *pesquisas*, women’s faces are returned to the city despite that their physical body is missing hence sending a powerful statement that the

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<sup>297</sup> See figure 9.

community is indebted to these women. While the pink crosses reveal more forcefully the problem of femicide, *pesquisas* show the serious problem of enforced disappearance. *Pesquisas* issue a call to the people of Ciudad Juárez: “help us to find her.” With this call they ask that the missing women and girls return home where family and friends still wait for them.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter wants to contribute to contemporary theoretical efforts to rethink the agency of the non-human world by articulating elements of that world as material entities.

Through a situated analysis of recent protest against femicide in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, I sought to show how social movement actors find themselves increasingly involved in struggles where non-human beings are seen as political actors in their own right. These efforts resonate with Bennett’s claim that we need to “find a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and non-human actants.”<sup>298</sup> Bennett’s notion of vibrant matter provides an important point of departure for accounting of those agencies which cannot be subsumed into the category of the human since their form of agency is differently manifested and experienced. In the instance of anti-femicide protests in Ciudad Juárez, the black and pink crosses, graffiti paintings, cross-monuments, *poemantas*, and *pesquisas* give more permanence to the protests even in those moments when human bodies do not or cannot carry on the protests. The pink crosses have the power to communicate that impunity continues to exist in Ciudad Juárez

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<sup>298</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 98.

and that the families of femicide victims have not received justice. The installation of pink crosses and *pesquisas* is therefore a political act through which a harmed city reveals the existence of a patriarchal system of government that keeps discriminating against women.

The material objects that I have been describing here helped to transform the landscape of the city into a powerful *funeralization*, demonstrating how femicide crimes blurred the spatial boundaries that keep the realms of the dead and the living separated, expanding the space of the dead into the city and bringing the victims' presence back to the community to keep their memory alive. This form of protest transcends the limited temporality of mass demonstrations and gives the anti-femicide protests more permanence even when human bodies do not, or cannot, carry on the protests. In this vein, a central contention in this chapter has been that *the funeralization* of the city reinterprets Ciudad Juárez as a city of resistance and undying protests rather than as a city-machine forever destined to produce violence. Spatial and material environments play a crucial role in these protests, showing that the absence of performing human bodies does not automatically translate into the absence of protests. On the contrary, these protests have taken a different form, whereby spatial and material objects have a more active role.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

**¡Ni Una Más!**

Paso a paso llegarán,  
Las Mujeres Caminarán,  
Rumbo a Juárez llegarán  
La Justicia llegará

Ellas gritan “ni una más”  
Ellas gritan “ni una más”  
Ni una más, ni una más  
Ni una más, ni una más.

Ellas buscan dignidad, paz  
Justicia y libertad  
También amor y equidad  
Ellas buscan solidaridad

*Ellas gritan ni una más.....*

Paso a paso sembrarán  
La conciencia expandirán  
Sembrando sembrando  
La conciencia llegará

*Ellas gritan ni una más.....*

No se cansan de gritar  
Ni tampoco de luchar  
Van sembrando dignidad  
Y exigiendo ni una mas

*Ellas gritan ni una más.....*

In 1993, the world began to know one of the most crude and extreme forms of violence directed against women. Since then, a struggle to end femicide in Ciudad Juárez has taken place. Anti-femicide protestors have described, diagnosed, and named the phenomenon, which has curtailed the life of hundreds of women and girls in this border town and many other parts in Latin America. In so doing, they have disputed the official version, which held that the killings were ordinary crimes that any one can find in a city with constant growth and development like Juárez. On the camp of the government authorities, extreme violence against women has been classified in ordinary terms, like

“sexual crimes, social violence, and crimes of passion.”<sup>299</sup> On the part of the activists, this phenomenon has been conceptualized with terms such as *Las Muertas de Juárez* (the dead women of Juárez), gender-based homicides, and, more recently, *feminicidio*, or femicide. The effort to name this particular reality has necessitated contributions from many different fronts and sources: the victims mothers, academics in a wide range of disciplines and fields, activists, journalists, human rights defenders, artists, public intellectuals, and ordinary men and women. The vast work observed in the project of naming this reality differently from government authorities reflects the complexity of femicide as well as the urgency to address it politically.

Today hardly anyone believes that femicide can be explained by alluding to a single cause or that responsibility for the killings can be assigned easily since a multiplicity of actors, conditions, structures, and practices converged to produce this peculiar crime. For the same reason, collective action and resistance against femicide could not rely on a single strategy. On the contrary, as I have tried to show in this dissertation, the battle against femicide required collaboration from multiple fronts and levels. This dissertation has described just a few of the practices seeking to disclose, denounce, and end feminicidal violence, including maternal activism, the mobilization of human rights discourse and norms, *acompañamiento* as an ethic of care, and the *funeralization* of the city. The mothers of femicide victims, the families, and prominent activists have developed the aforementioned practices to make gender-based violence visible. Protesters came forth to disclose the cruelest details surrounding the women’s deaths. In doing so, they exposed the overwhelming impunity, which operates at the three

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<sup>299</sup> Araluce, “Transnational Advocacy,” 162-163.

levels of government: the laxity of the police, corruption, and indifference towards the growing numbers of female victims.

What new knowledge do we find by looking at femicidal violence from the perspective of the protests and practices of resistance launched by those who bear its crudest impact? At its most basic level, the Juárez experience shows that women have done much more than merely take the violence passively. They have organized in different ways to diagnose, name, reveal, and resist this new modality of gender-based violence. At the same time, they have proposed positive formulations that may help to stop the violence, even if this goal has yet to be accomplished. The practices described in the previous chapters give us a little glimpse of the collective efforts devised to address the complexity of femicide. For example, they have called for professional investigations, the creation of a special agency dedicated to address crimes against women specifically, they have proposed workshops, training programs, and teaching rallies focused on gender, human rights, domestic violence, and community organizing.

While these are concrete measures that activists have proposed to address gender-based violence, there is a larger critique, which questions the capacity or willingness of the state to pursue justice on behalf of its own people. In fact, an important lesson that we learn throughout these pages is that the only measure of protection against state corruption and impunity is solidarity between the people (see chapter 2). In this dissertation, I have suggested that femicide needs to be understood as a product of women's protest and practices of resistance and not the other way around. This may sound as a controversial statement, however, its purpose is rather to give credit to the hundreds of women and men who have produced the knowledge that allows us academics

to grasp what is happening in Ciudad Juárez. The protests and practices of resistance, I argue, are the groundwork that allows us to understand what practices, institutions, and structures failed to address the violence against women to the point that more, rather than less, killings occurred.

“Undying Protests: On Collective Action and practices of Resistance against Femicide in Ciudad Juárez” speaks not only about activists’ promise to keep protesting until femicides are cleared up and families of the victims see the perpetrators brought to justice. It is also an argument for the need to shift our gaze in the direction of the protests, practices, and struggles around gender-based violence in Ciudad Juárez in order to demystify the practices, institutions, and mechanisms that produced femicide. Taking this approach, I have argued, allows us to untangle a phenomenon that government officials in northern Mexico conceal and a number of journalists have deemed beyond understanding. This argument has very important ramifications. One of them is the need to have a serious and sustained conversation with what I call activist epistemologies: the knowledge that emerges from the experiences, contestations, and provocations of those who encounter femicide on a daily basis since protestors not only understand the roots of the violence, but also propose concrete measures to address it.

The group of mothers that came into public life after losing a daughter to femicide or enforced disappearance has been very persistent in the struggle to make femicidal violence visible even if doing so has meant disclosing their personal stories of loss, sadness, and neglect to alert the public that the state institutions act with impunity. Femicide and enforced disappearance provoked the mobilization of mothers despite that nothing inherent in the experience of mothering dictates that a mother should



always assume the responsibility of protesting the death of a child when she or he is brutally murdered. In fact, their complains and critique of the state makes clear that justice is the responsibility of the state and the political institutions not the responsibility of mother, relatives, or activists. Regardless, the context of impunity in Ciudad Juárez forced the mothers to seek justice on their own accord.

By looking at the stories and experiences of mothers like Paula Flores and Marisela Escobedo we learned that maternal activism did not emerge because of the experience of giving birth to a child, but because of death or injury. With this, I don't want to deny that the mother-child relationship is important. After all, both women were protesting the murder of their own daughters. However, what I want to highlight is that political mobilization was possible because of the government's denial that these women were physically, morally and politically wronged and also because of the need to show that such an injury deserved to be investigated, cleared up, and castigated. Maternal acts of self-disclosure have pursued what I have termed a politics of visibility whereby the ubiquitous expansion of state violence and systematic discrimination against women has been constantly revealed. Since 1993, the mothers of Chihuahua have espoused an ethic of transparency, disclosing their most intimate secrets to counter the lies, simulations, negations, and persistent attempts of government officials to conceal femicide and enforced disappearance.

The mothers' politics of self-disclosure shows that the question of what is maternalism's proper sphere of activity cannot be decided in advance. The mother's quest for justice in Ciudad Juárez, in other words, demonstrates that the boundaries between the private and the public realms are inoperable in practice since the mothers'

attempt to make gender based violence visible depends on the permanent revelation of their private lives and secrets. The victims' mothers have had to reveal the conditions under which their daughters disappeared, the sadness that overcame them after learning about that loss, and the ordeal of seeking justice through the established government agencies and institutions. In doing so, they have adopted a clear and translucent posture to expose the threats, repression, and corrupt nature of the state. These acts of self-disclosure seek not compassion or pity, but trust and solidarity with the struggle to end femicide in Ciudad Juárez as the ¡Ni Una Más! song above suggests:

Ellas buscan dignidad, paz

Justicia y libertad

También amor y equidad

Ellas buscan solidaridad

*Ellas gritan ni una más.....*

They search for dignity, peace

Justice and liberty

They [also search for] love and equality

They look for solidarity

*They sing not one more...*

Self-disclosure is offered as an alternative to the repressive, corrupt, and patriarchal nature of the state. It seeks to cultivate trust through values that speak of human dignity, justice, liberty, and solidarity. Based on this evidence and the stories and experiences of Paula Flores and Marisela Escobedo, this dissertation has advanced the argument that maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez is a collective rather than individual. This is clear in Paula Flores's claim that "desde que desapareció Sagrario, el patio todo el tiempo estaba lleno de gente, de toda la comunidad (when Sagrario disappeared, our backyard was always full of people, the whole community [kept coming])."<sup>300</sup> This community kept coming to demonstrate their support and commitment to help her in her struggle. In fact, collective action is at the core of every single practice of resistance deployed against femicide: maternal activism, human rights discourses, acompañamiento, and the *funeralization* of the city.

Academic accounts of maternal activism, which focus on its paradoxical status, fail to take into account the practical aspect of this strategy: how and why maternalism is embraced to denounce feminicidal violence? As I mentioned earlier, in the specific case of Ciudad Juárez, maternal activism emerged because the victims' mothers, not the state, have taken on the task of seeking justice for their daughters. Mothers have been forced to conduct their own investigations to find the daughters because police officers would not help them. Activists' appeal to human rights discourses and norms, however, has sought to redress this situation by using the language of human rights as an alternative system of justice capable of pressuring the authorities to guaranty the victims' rights and those of the families. Human rights language and norms, in other words, has provided the

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<sup>300</sup> Paula Flores as quoted in Bonilla and Pedroza, *La Carta*.

framework to redefine feminicide as a human rights violation mainly due to the activists' conceptualization and mobilization of the concept of impunity is attentive to the mothers' experiences. Human rights language has also provided the framework to enable the victims' families to understand feminicide and enforced disappearance as a problem enabled by state institutions and not as a simply having to do with deviancy and pathologies of some individuals.

Maternal activism and the production, interpretation, mobilization of the human rights discourses and norms are practices of resistance which exist alongside a practice that I have called the *funeralization* of the city. The *funeralization* of the city is a practice wherein the objects—pink crosses, graffiti paintings, anti-feminicide memorials, and *pesquisas* (portraits printed on a small piece of paper which reveal that a person is missing)—become not simply vehicles for the protests but contained an agency that exceeded the human one that originally brought it into being. This practice, I have suggested, has transformed the landscape of the city challenging state's silence and the impunity of perpetrators, rendering collective action more permanent even when the anti-feminicide activists do not or cannot carry on the protests. I have shown that material objects also participate in what I term the politics of visibility by providing a visual map of the places where gender-based violence is more intense. The fact that these objects appear in spaces considered for the living: streets, parks, public buses, etc., reveals not only that feminicidal violence persists, but also that this violence is always contested.

Finally, the practice of *acompañamiento* and the ethics of care demonstrate that the intensification of violence has forced residents of Ciudad Juárez to build relations of trust and care that may allow them to mitigate the persistence of violence at the border.

*Acompañamiento* is a practice that, as Tronto's conceptualization of ethics of care suggests, reveals that the liberal myth of the autonomous individual is inoperable in contexts of extreme violence where survival depends not on self-reliance and isolation but on collective cooperation and mutual care. The intensification of violence in Ciudad Juárez has created terrains of resistance absolutely dependent on *acompañamiento*. Thus, in response to the question how is life possible in a so-called city of murdered women, in this dissertation I have argued that the continuation of life is life is only possible through *acompañamiento*.

While the protests and practices of resistance that I have discussed in this dissertation cannot be credited, as of now, with the so much desired extenuation of gender-based violence at the border, they have help us understand the context of violence that many voices have deemed beyond comprehension. These practices reveal that women in Ciudad Juárez are not voiceless victims in need of saving. On the contrary, it may be the case that the activists' experiences give different ways of conceptualizing life, death, and political change outside the liberal framework. While a critique of violence and its devastating effects is very much needed, it is also important to look at all those forms of resistance and contestation that give us an account of the innovative forms of collective organization that emerges from these practices. This form ok knowledge that emerges from the activist practices and experiences needs to be recognized in the academy very much in need of democratization. It is this knowledge that I have tried to document through a detailed discussion of the four central practices: maternal activism, human rights discourses and practice, *acompañamiento* and the ethics of care, and the *funeralization* of the city.

Together these practices have help us understand the present history of Ciudad Juárez, a very complex border space that nonetheless have many lessons to teach to scholars, academics, and activists working on collective action, political resistance, and political change in the context of intense violence. Much more research needs to be produced in order to continue documenting a plethora of practices that this study left outside. However, this dissertation adds an important contribution to the literature by showing that intense violence can be understood if we pay attention to those women who seek to contest the violence on a daily basis. It is important, however, to note that this is not only an argument that seeks to recognize the value of protests and collective action. It is also an argument that seeks to recognize the epistemological contributions made by activists, who after all redefined Ciudad Juárez as a city of Undying Protests and Resistance.

## APPENDIX: OBJECTS OF RESISTANCE



Figure 1 Marisela Escobedo (left).



Figure 2 Marisela Escobedo leading a protest in Juárez after Barraza's liberation.  
Photograph taken by Judith Torres.



Figure 3 Voces sin Eco. Black Cross Campaign. Photograph by Victoria Delgadillo, Hijas de Juárez exhibit.





**Figure 4 Cross Monument in Chihuahua City.**

**Photograph taken by the author.**



**Figure 5 Cross Monument in Ciudad Juárez.**

**Photograph taken by the author.**



**Figure 6 Sculpture Flor de Arena by Artist Veronica Leiton.**

**Photograph taken by the author.**



**Figure 7 Example of Pesquisa in Ciudad Juárez.**

**Photograph by the Author.**



Figure 8 Example of *Pesquisa* in Ciudad Juárez.

Photograph taken by the author.



**Figure 9 Example of Pesquisa in Downtown Ciudad Juárez.**

**Photograph taken by the author.**



**Figure 10 Public Campaign against Enforced Disappearance in Juárez.**  
**Photograph taken by the author.**



Figure 11 Graffiti in Downtown Ciudad Juárez.



Figure 12 Example of *Poemanta* in Chihuahua City.

Photograph taken by the author.



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