

Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border

What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?
—Achille Mbembe (2003, 12)

In 1993, a group of women shocked Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, with the news that dozens of girls and women had been murdered and dumped, like garbage, around the city during the year. As the numbers of murders grew over the years, and as the police forces proved unable and unwilling to find the perpetrators, the protestors became activists. They called the violence and consequent impunity for the crimes “femicide,” and they demanded that the Mexican government, at the local, state, and federal levels, stop the violence and prosecute the murderers.

Nearly two decades later, the city’s infamy as a place of femicide is giving way to another terrible reputation, now as a place of unprecedented drug violence. Since 2006, more than six thousand people have died in the city, and more than twenty-eight thousand across the country, in relation to the violence associated with the restructuring of the cartels that control the production and distribution of illegal drugs across Mexico. As with the femicides, the principal targets of the violence associated with

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the drug trade come from the city's working poor, whose productive labor established Ciudad Juárez's reputation as a profitable hub of global industrialization in the era of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In response to the public outcry against the violence, the Mexican government has deployed thousands of troops to numerous cities, Ciudad Juárez being prominent among them, as part of a military strategy to secure the state against the cartels. The violence has worsened under the army's presence, however, with the city becoming one of the most violent in the world (Mora 2009; Miglierini 2010). Moreover, domestic and international human rights organizations have documented record-breaking numbers of human and civil rights violations on the part of Mexican federal forces (LaFranchi 2009; Human Rights Watch 2010). As a result, the Mexican federal government is facing a political crisis as debates ensue over the meaning of the violence for the viability of the Mexican state. On one side, growing numbers of people are declaring that the violence represents, as the noted Mexican historian Víctor Orozco (2009) has written, "a failure of state." On the other, supporters of the president and his governing coalition claim that the violence demonstrates the state's success in disrupting the drug trade, such that the increase in violence directly reflects an increase in state power (Wilkinson 2008). These debates reveal how, as the Mexican public scholar, activist, and Chihuahua legislator Victor Quintana (2010) has recently written, "a war of interpretations" is central to the state's response to the violence, an argument first made (as he notes) by the antifemicide activists who called the government's response to the femicides tantamount to a war against civil society (Wright 2006, 151–70). At the heart of such wars lies the question, Do the dead bodies in Ciudad Juárez's streets indicate a failing state, as the activists argue, or a stronger one, as the government contends? To address that question, I argue that the politics over the meaning of the drug-related murders and femicide must be understood in relation to gendered violence and its use as a tool for securing the state.

To that end, I examine the wars over the interpretation of death in northern Mexico through the concept of necropolitics as elaborated by the postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe. Mbembe defines necropolitics to be politics as a "work of death" (2003, 12), which he presents as a corrective complement to Michel Foucault's widely used idea of biopolitics (Mbembe 2002). Foucault argues that modern liberal governance differed from previous absolutist versions in that it controlled the population not through the threat of death but through techniques for controlling living populations. Biopolitics, he writes, consists of "numerous and diverse

techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1979, 140). The justification for modern governments, he continues, rests on the reproduction of living subjects. While using Foucault’s argument as a point of departure, Mbembe argues that biopolitics is not sufficient for explaining how the threat of violent death continues to prevail as a technique of governance in contemporary settings, and he challenges Foucault’s reliance on Western European examples to develop his theory of the kinship binding the production of states to the reproduction of their subjects. Mbembe instead draws examples from the more politically volatile states of the postcolonial context to insist that they provide insights through which we can understand politics as a form of war in which the sovereign emerges through the determination of who dies or who does not die and, therefore, lives. Mbembe, however, employs Foucault’s analysis to turn attention to how the meaning of death in necropolitics, like the meaning of life in biopolitics, emerges through interpretations of embodiment—of corpses, of who kills, and of who is targeted for death. Biopolitics is intimately wound into necropolitics, since governments protect the lives of some by justifying the deaths of others (Braidotti 2007). Thus, he argues, addressing “the relationship between politics and death” is essential for understanding how states emerge through the reproduction of death, including its meaning and representation, as the counterpart to life (Mbembe 2003, 16).¹

With this concept of necropolitics in mind, I examine how the wars over the political meaning of death in relation both to femicide and to the events called drug violence unfold through a gendering of space, of violence, and of subjectivity. My objective is twofold: first, to demonstrate how the antifemicide movement illustrates the stakes for a democratic Mexican state and its citizens while governing elites argue that the violence devastating Ciudad Juárez is a positive outcome of the government’s war against organized crime; and second, to show how a politics of gender is central to this kind of necropolitics. I am not the first feminist theorist to point out that gender politics are foundational not only to the formation of the liberal democratic institutions that emerged out of the destruction

¹ This question reflects Mbembe’s dialogue with the work of Giorgio Agamben, who poses that question in relation to the state of exception. Mbembe, however, does not regard the politics of death as presenting an exception but rather as the dominant social configuration in states that operate under conditions of emergency, as in martial law imposed by civilian governments or as in the crisis declared right now in Mexico. Both authors reveal in their analyses a debt to F. W. J. Schelling’s idea of the “living dead” as subjects who never realize their full potential while living under the politics of death (Žižek 2004, 23).

of absolutist states but also to the organization of states as the legitimate arbiters of violence (Landes 1988; Melzer and Rabine 1992; McMillan 2009). For instance, as historian Joan Landes has written, “a pervasive gendering of the public sphere” operates as a “mechanism of violence” for defining and controlling the modern liberal subject around the exclusion of “the feminine” from the public sphere of politics, economy, and culture (1988, 2). Gender, in other words, is central to the violent dynamics linking the production of states to the reproduction of their subjects. As the proliferation of gendered violence around the world indicates, this kind of violence is constitutive of necropolitics: the politics of death and the politics of gender go hand in hand (United Nations 2006). As the antifemicide movement clearly demonstrates, however, the neglect of gender so prevalent in discussions such as Mbembe’s limits the political possibilities for subverting the relations of power reproduced through gendered necropolitics as people encounter the violence of gender in their daily lives (Ahmetbeyzade 2008).²

The relevance of these issues for contemporary Mexico and for the governance of its shared border with its northern neighbor has surfaced repeatedly in my research into the antifemicide movement in Ciudad Juárez over the past twelve years and, more recently, in my studies of the experience of state-sponsored militarization along the Mexico-U.S. border. Several authors have published extensively on the antifemicide movement.³ However, no work to date has analyzed the movement in relation to the challenges for organizing against the government’s response, or lack of response, to what is commonly called drug violence. Drawing on interviews I conducted with political, corporate, and activist leaders, as well as on ethnographic material collected in 2004, I present a discourse analysis arguing that the connections between the two antiviolenence movements are essential to understanding and confronting the violence that the movements combat. Because of the present escalation of violence and attacks against scholars, activists, and civic leaders in Ciudad Juárez, I have taken extra precautions to hide the identities of some key informants. Many Mexican journalists are no longer signing their own articles, and many scholars are refusing to publish their findings for fear of violent

² Jasbir K. Puar’s (2007) interrogation of the U.S. politics of terrorism at the intersection of queer, feminist, and postcolonial studies has also advanced the discussion of Mbembe’s necropolitics and Agamben’s state of exception.

³ Feminist analyses of femicide in Juárez began appearing in 1999 (Benítez et al. 1999; Nathan 1999; Wright 1999; Fregoso 2000; Monárrez Fragoso 2000, 2001) and inaugurated scholarship that has had palpable impact on the activist movement (see Wright 2001; Fregoso 2003; Tabuenca Cordoba 2003b; Schmidt Camacho 2005, among others).

reprisal (Castillo 2010).⁴ For this reason, the analysis here also relies more heavily on newspaper accounts for interview material than is usual in my work. A study of the necropolitics of gendered violence could not be more timely, as the activists and scholars struggling against governing justifications for the deaths in northern Mexico find their own lives in danger.

The gendered politics of “getting what they asked for”

I explore the mechanisms of violence . . . and the silencing of public women.—Joan Landes (1988, 2)

In 1994, one year after the news broke that women and girls were being hunted down in Ciudad Juárez, a group of women formed a new group called La Coordinadora de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales en Pro de la Mujer (the coalition of nongovernmental organizations for women, hereafter “the coalition”). The participating organizations, eventually numbering fourteen, had emerged during the previous decade in response to the problems of a city dealing with rapid industrialization and migration that saw the proliferation of squatter settlements, single-headed households, domestic violence, children at risk, and public health and educational shortfalls. One of the original creators of the coalition, Esther Chávez Cano, a retired accountant and feminist activist, described the organization as “a unique political force” in the city: the political establishment “had never imagined that [women] could have that kind of impact on public politics. We shocked them!”⁵

While only one participating organization, Chávez Cano’s El 8 de Marzo de Ciudad Juárez, was an explicitly feminist group, the coalition created a feminist tone in its justice demands, which centered around three principal ideas: that the city government and the city’s export-processing firms implement strategies for preventing further deaths and kidnappings, that the Chihuahua state conduct competent investigations into

⁴ Numerous organizations monitor the deteriorating situation for journalists, scholars, and activists in the country. See, e.g., *Frontera NorteSur* at <http://www.nmsu.edu/frontera> and the Justice in Mexico Project at <http://www.justiceinmexico.org>. I have had several conversations with scholars from two of the public universities in Ciudad Juárez over their decision not to publish findings critical of the government since 2007.

⁵ My interview with Esther Chávez Cano, conducted in her home, February 2007; translation mine.

the crimes already committed, and that governing elites at all levels address the cultural, political, and economic context that justified violence against women and that established the conditions for murdering them with impunity (Pérez García 1999.)

In communicating these demands, the coalition made connections between the violence and the political economy of export processing that had been the engine of growth along Mexico's northern border and that had laid the path for the implementation of NAFTA in 1994. The coalition called for better policing and for lighting along the dark roads that women and girls had to walk as they commuted to their jobs in the city's export-processing industries, or maquiladoras. They urged employers to provide livable wages and safe transportation for the workers, and they demanded that violence against women be taken seriously at the municipal and state levels of governance. As the director of an organization working with sex workers and HIV education told me in a 1997 interview, "They did not want to see the politics behind the violence. That's what we made them see."⁶

To generate force behind their demands, the antifemicide protestors created national and international networks that brought attention to the violence and made Ciudad Juárez notorious for the murders of the same young women whose work had attracted attention to the feminization of the international division of labor. As a result, domestic and international political and consumer organizations pressured the political leaders of Mexico as well as the leaders of international corporations doing business in the country to stop the femicide.

Political and corporate elites resisted the idea that the violence represented a political or economic problem, and they answered the coalition's charges by claiming that the victims were not worthy of so much attention. As Chihuahua Governor Francisco Barrio put it in 1995, the murder numbers fell within normal ranges for the city (Diebel 1997).⁷ His assertion rested on the city's reputation, forged during the years of U.S. Prohibition, as a working-class city of vice and cultural contamination, reflective of its proximity to a powerful northern neighbor with its loose sexual mores and military men looking for cheap sex and alcohol, among other tawdry entertainments (Tabuenca Córdoba 1995–96). Unlike other

⁶ Interview, Ciudad Juárez, 1997.

⁷ The controversy over his dismissal of the murders has been recently renewed with Barrio's 2009 appointment as the Mexican ambassador to Canada. Antifemicide activists along with other rights organizations in Canada protested his appointment and brought further scrutiny of his role in the violence and the surrounding impunity during the 1990s.

cities, Ciudad Juárez did not confine prostitution (legal in Mexico) to particular *zonas de tolerancia* but instead allowed it to flourish anywhere in the city. The city was famous for the women in its public streets, squares, and markets, who sold sex as “public women.”⁸

This reputation solidified during the 1970s as young women started migrating by the thousands to find work in the industries hiring female workers. The public association of *obrero* (worker) with *ramera* (whore) was something that factory workers faced constantly, as women who walked the streets on their way to work and women who walked the streets as part of their work added to the city’s fame as a city of public women (see, e.g., Nathan 2002). Often portrayed as evidence of the social disintegration of the Mexican family, factory workers were the very people responsible for Mexico’s reputation as a hub of global manufacturing. But since the workers behind this fame were public women, rather than private ones with their virtue intact, the city’s proud industrial reputation was constantly joined with the shame that it was built by women who worked outside the home (Tabuenca Córdoba 1995–96). The characterization of *obreras* as typifying a kind of public woman relies on a negative interpretation of prostitution as emblematic of women who are contaminated by their activities in the public sphere and who, in turn, contaminate their families, communities, and nations (Castillo, Rangel Gómez, and Delgado 1999). The political stakes of such a characterization are even more apparent when contrasted to the term “public man,” which in Mexico is another way of saying “citizen.”⁹ Taken to its logical extreme, the government’s public woman discourse explains that, while unfortunate, the deaths of public women represent a kind of public cleansing, as the removal of troublesome women restores the moral and political balance of society (Wright 1999; Fregoso and Bejarano 2010).

This fame of the city’s public women was the subcontext to the governor’s words when he declared that the murdering and dumping of dozens of young women and girls across the city was normal for a city like Ciudad Juárez (Tabuenca Córdoba 2003a). He assured Mexican families that there was nothing to fear as long as they knew where their female family members were. The discourse of the public woman normalized the violence and used the victims’ bodies as a way to substantiate the politics

⁸ For a fuller discussion of common discourses regarding cultural contamination and sex workers in Mexican border cities, see Castillo, Rangel Gómez, and Delgado (1999) and Wright (2006).

⁹ I would like to thank Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba for pointing out this linguistic distinction to me.

based on patriarchal notions of normality. Normal Mexican families, with normal, private women safely at home, had nothing to worry about.

The police reiterated this idea when they told worried families and friends of women and girls who had gone missing that they most likely lived “double lives” (Nathan 1999, 26; Wright 1999, 456). They repeated the message to the grieving friends and families after bodies had been found. Rather than respond to the violence with professional investigations to find the criminals and stop the violence, they told friends and families that there was nothing they could do. Girls who live double lives often end up dead; that was a normal chain of events, so the lack of investigations and convictions was not a problem given that there was not anything wrong with the violence (Amnesty International 2003). Chávez Cano, who accompanied many of the family members to meet with police and demand police action, summed up the attitude: “The police say the dead women and girls were hookers, or that they were heroin-users. Their whole point is that it’s somehow the fault of these girls. . . . We are supposed to believe these women are responsible for their own deaths” (quoted in Diebel 1997, A1).

As the number of corpses grew, the brutality of the crimes and the lack of convictions became political issues in the city and the general public began to demand answers. As one of the students in my economic geography course at one of the city’s public universities declared one day in 1996, “You could get arrested faster for stealing a car than for killing a girl!” The mayor’s office addressed mounting public concerns by taking out a series of announcements in the city’s newspapers in 1995, which cautioned female residents to avoid being inappropriately public, wearing provocative clothing, and frequenting dangerous public places (Tabuena Córdoba 2003a). The governing authorities also urged families to keep track of their female members’ whereabouts, so as to discourage them from leading double lives, as workers or students by day and prostitutes by night (Limas Hernández 1998). As one United Nations commission reported, the impression created by the state and local government’s response was that the victims “were looking to be murdered” (United Nations 1999, item 85; translation mine).

Beyond simply explaining the violence as inevitable and normal in a city of public women, political and corporate elites used this discourse as a way to weaken public sympathy for the victims of the violence and thereby to dilute the public pressure to prioritize women’s safety. In claiming that the victims were public women who actually caused the violence that ended their lives, they referred to a line of argument that in its extreme actually justifies the violence against women as a way to rid society of

trouble. If a public woman is the source of the violence, then her murder provides a means for ending it. Her removal performs a kind of urban cleansing. The public woman discourse, in short, was a key tool for positioning the dead women and girls in the political order; it was a pillar of the necropolitics demonstrating that the publicness of the victims, as evidenced by the corpses' location in public places and the mutilations of their raped bodies, caused the violence that was disrupting the social and political peace of northern Mexico.¹⁰

The coalition fought the government's gendered necropolitics by challenging the discourse of the public woman and the violent gendering of space that justified the murders as evidence of a normal life, by personalizing the victims and introducing them to the public as daughters (*hijas*). The move drew on other social movements in Mexico and Latin America in which activists, many of them mothers, fought against repressive states that used violent tactics to quash social protest. By referring to the victims of violence as innocent children, activists throughout Latin America had countered prevailing state discourses of them as communists, terrorists, or subversives. The coalition used this tactic as a way to fight against the public woman discourse, not by fully dismantling it but by rejecting the idea that *buenas hijas* (good daughters) did not have a legitimate place in the city's public sphere, on its streets, and in its factories (Wright 2007). The victims were fulfilling their family duties by working outside of the home to provide for their families. "We knew we had to do something when they just laughed at us for demanding investigations," Chávez said in 2007. "So we introduced the victims to the public. We showed them to be human beings."¹¹

With this strategy, the activists flipped the sexist discourse of public women on its head by declaring that the victims were in public space for private reasons: they were augmenting their family income by working outside of the home. Therefore, the violence that threatened these "daughters" was a violence that threatened the very foundation of Mexican society: the patriarchal family that taught its daughters to put family obligation first, even if that meant working outside the home. In this way, the activists fought against the necropolitics justifying femicide as a logical outcome of dangerous female sexuality that makes violent men out of otherwise peaceful ones. The activists countered the discourse by declaring that the victims represented the very core of Mexican society. The violence, in short, indicated a weak state.

¹⁰ See Nathan (1999), Fregoso (2003), Schmidt Camacho (2005), and Wright (2006).

¹¹ Interview with Esther Chávez Cano, at her home in Ciudad Juárez, February 2007.

Through their defiance of the authorities' necropolitics, the coalition and other antifemicide activists made notable progress in forcing a recalcitrant political and corporate establishment to take some action (Pérez García 1999). The appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the murders in 1998 and the formation of an office to work with victims' families were major successes for the movement. In addition, politicians running for statewide and federal office were forced to answer questions regarding their approach to the violence against women in northern Mexico, and corporate officials fell under heightened international scrutiny as activists beyond Mexico pressured them to take measures to improve the safety of their workers. Chávez Cano explained, "The coalition won some major battles. We were in a war against the establishment. They wanted to keep profiting from the idea that the victims were worthless because they were poor and female. We fought them and did not let them get away with it."¹²

The public woman discourse lurked even within the actions that the governing political and corporate elites did take. For instance, the criminologist hired by Mexican officials in 1998 to examine the crimes announced that they were the result of temptations created by the victims, whom he compared to offering candy to schoolchildren; they were "sweet" temptations (Orquiz 1998, 3C; translation mine). He concluded that the murders reflected a "social shock" due to an assault on "traditional values," as reflected in women working and finding entertainment outside the home. True to the public women discourse behind his conclusions, he placed much of the blame for the violence on the victims when he warned that "women workers [are] seeking adventure without paying attention to the danger" (3C; translation mine). His findings corroborated the necropolitical order that normalized violence against public women.

One year later, the director of the Asociación de Maquiladoras de Ciudad Juárez (AMAC) espoused similar ideas in a high-profile interview aired on the U.S. news program *20/20*. In response to a question about the source of the violence, he retorted, "Where were these young ladies when they were seen last? Were they drinking? Were they partying? Were they on a dark street? Or were they in front of their plant when they went home?" (Quiñones 1999). More women on the street, in his view, meant more dead bodies on the street.

Such assertions began to haunt the governing elites as more bodies appeared and as the national and international press turned femicide into

¹² Interview with Esther Chávez Cano, at her home in Ciudad Juárez, February 2003.

a major news item. In 2001, the terrible discovery of eight female corpses in central Ciudad Juárez, in a lot located directly across from the AMAC offices and down the street from the city's only Walmart, galvanized outrage across the country. Thousands across the country protested the government's failure to stop the torture and murder of the city's young women. Marches within the city, across the state, and across the country ensued; new organizations formed with stronger international connections, and congressional delegations from the United States, Spain, and other prominent countries added to the pressure. The United Nations appointed delegations to investigate the crimes, and Amnesty International (2003) gathered evidence for a scathing report on the government's incompetent investigations, on its indifference to the murders, and on the public woman discourse used to blame the victims.

Through the protests, delegations, and human rights reports, a different narrative gained strength about the murders and the state's responsibility in relation to them. The activists launched a narrative of impunity, a charge leveled at the governing authorities for providing safe harbor to well-connected criminals. The focus on impunity had roots in the early coalition protests that had criticized political and corporate leaders for creating a context, via their normalizing story of public women, that deflected attention from the murderers and justified state inaction. As Quintana (2010) commented in a major Mexican newspaper, the femicides revealed "the impunity of the state." After 2001, the activists circulated the narrative of impunity across domestic and international networks and turned it into a political challenge to the authorities' ability to control the interpretation of the murders.

Under renewed political pressure, the governing authorities expanded their use of the public woman discourse by aiming it increasingly at the activists in addition to the victims (Wright 2007). They associated the activists with prostitutes who functioned as madams, who sold the bodies of the dead to an international press always looking for stories of sex and violence along the border.¹³ In 2003, the governor's office focused this assault on the leaders of an organization called Las Mujeres de Negro, a coalition of organizations based in the state capital that had joined together

¹³ This attack on activists has always accompanied the protests. Chávez Cano was a primary target in 1999, and family members of the victims have also been harassed and assaulted (Amnesty International 2003). But it expanded noticeably after the 2001 protests (see also Martínez Coronado 2003).

to coordinate protests after the 2001 murders.¹⁴ Accusing the *Mujeres de Negro* of, as one journalist described it, “profiting from dead girls,” the state attorney general publicly denounced all antifemicide activists as selling out the victims and their grieving families for their own political and economic gain (Piñon Balderrama 2003, A1). The *Mujeres de Negro* fought back by announcing that the governor had declared “war against NGOs” and the democratization that they represent (Perea Quintanilla 2003). The activists sharpened their discourse on impunity, and via a number of protest events they kept it in the news as a strategy for declaring their own war against the government’s ongoing efforts to spin the murders as normal. “They thought we would shut up,” said Irma Campos, a *Mujeres de Negro* leader, in 2007, “but we just got more angry and saw that the stakes were high. We had to keep the message of impunity in the news. We could not let them win that fight.”¹⁵

The attack on the activists proved much more damaging to the antifemicide movement than the implications that victims were responsible for their own murders had been. As one of the *Mujeres de Negro* leaders, Alma Gómez, told me in 2007, “It wasn’t true, but the accusation of ‘lucrar’ was very damaging.”¹⁶ By the early 2000s, the idea that women who protest publicly on the street are hysterical and suspicious gained steam as the local media reported on infighting within the organizations and on the personal profiting of some activists who acted as spokespeople for the movement (see, e.g., Guerrero, Minjares, and Torres 2004; Rodríguez Nieto 2004). As a result, public sympathy began to wane by 2004. The necropolitics of public women began to pay off for governing elites as they intensified their attacks on the activists. By 2005, domestic pressure over the femicides was negligible as the governing authorities and corporate leaders announced that the activists had done enough damage to the region’s reputation and that it was time to think about other things, such as restoring the area’s good reputation for cheap and productive labor.

Within a couple of years, however, another set of events related to drug violence would create a new set of challenges for both the antifemicide activists and the governing authorities in their war over the meaning of violence for the state. These events had been presaged in 2003 by the

¹⁴ In northern Mexico, especially in Ciudad Juárez, this assault also drew strength from the region’s fame as a place where women had participated in the country’s democratization movement of the 1980s, which eventually brought an end to the monopoly that the Institutional Revolutionary Party held over the country’s governance (Hernández Hernández 2002).

¹⁵ Interview with Irma Campos, Chihuahua City, February 2007.

¹⁶ Interview with Alma Gómez, Ciudad Juárez, 2007.

discovery of the bodies of twelve men in a middle-class neighborhood, a few kilometers from where the eight women and girls had been dumped. The male victims also showed signs of torture and were buried in a shallow grave in the backyard of a middle-class home. The government immediately attributed the murders to the internal politics of drug gangs (*narcos*); the house quickly gained fame as “a *narcocasa*,” the shallow grave as a “*narcofosa*,” and the dead bodies as “*narcos*.” Their discovery, unlike that of the eight female victims, did not spark a public outcry. There were no marches, no protests, and little public pressure placed on authorities. The story of impunity told by the antifemicide activists did not find instant traction with the murders attributed to drug violence, but within a few years, antifemicide and civil rights activists had begun to organize a public campaign illustrating how the government’s story of public women is part and parcel of its story of drug violence. Challenging the government’s story of narcopolitics is now a major battle in the war against its necropolitics.

The gendered politics of “killing each other off”

The war of interpretations also forms part of the “war against organized crime.”—Victor Quintana, state legislator (2010)

That the upsurge in violence and the intensification of its public viciousness is tied to a restructuring of the country’s lucrative drug trade is not under dispute. Rather, the war of interpretation revolves around the story told by governing elites regarding the meaning of this violence for the state and its subjects, versus the one told by human and civil rights activists critical of the government’s interpretation of the violence, the corpses it produces, and their political significance. At the heart of this war of interpretation is the ongoing gendering of public space as a principal mechanism of necropolitics.

The government’s discourse of drug violence rests on a blame-the-victim strategy that, like the discourse of public women, relies on the gendering of the public sphere to tell the following tale: Drug violence is an outcome of the disputes internal to the drug trade that emerge when competition over markets, resources, alliances, and political protection develops. The violence, therefore, is perpetrated by businessmen involved in an illegal business. Even though these businessmen are criminals, they demonstrate the masculine traits of competition, rationality, and violence.

By understanding their masculine traits, the rest of the public can rest assured that the violence, while appearing chaotic, actually demonstrates an intrinsic logic and structure. Since the violence is intended for targets within the drug trade and not innocent civilians, and because the violence is disruptive to social stability, it is bad for business; consequently, the violence represents disruptions to the drug trade that are unwelcome to the rational businessmen involved in it, who only resort to it out of desperation. The key points in this discourse are that the violence is internal, it disrupts the drug trade, and we know these things because those perpetrating the violence are rational. They do not kill people at random. The people they kill, by and large, are criminals guilty of being involved in the drug trade. Drug violence is the killing of criminals by other criminals.

This discourse began to take shape in the mid-1990s with the formation of the Ciudad Juárez and Sinoloa drug cartels and the subsequent violence in northern Mexico that began to capture headlines at the same time as the femicides and the passage of NAFTA. For instance, a 1993 *New York Times* article outlines the discourse as it develops through interviews with business and political leaders: “Rather than merely moving cocaine, the official said, Mr. Felix Gallardo, a former Sinaloa state policeman, has emerged as a diversified merchant of narcotics services. . . . ‘Felix Gallardo is really a sort of investment banker for the others,’ the official said” (Golden 1993, A3). The article then quotes a business leader who voices the common idea of the violence as internal to the business: “‘Mostly you saw them killing each other,’ said Mr. Niebla, the head of a local manufacturers’ group. ‘More than making you concerned, it made you happy: they were wiping each other out’” (A3). The characterization of the cartel bosses as international businessmen, sometimes referred to as cocaine businessmen, and the idea of the violence as largely irrelevant for people not involved in the trade, is found throughout news accounts based on interviews of Mexican political and business leaders (Robberson 1993; von Raab and Messing 1993). The sound of “quiet,” as one journalist reports officials as saying, “is the sound of business booming” organized by men who are “cooler” and “more businesslike” than typical homicidal maniacs; they have rational reasons for “killing each other” (Golden 1995, A1). Such interpretations of the violence endow the criminals with a logical mindset reminiscent of rational choice actors: they are driven by their business interests, they resort to extreme measures to protect their turf and territory against competitors, but they are not irrational lunatics wreaking havoc on society, because, in the end, chaos is bad for business.

This reasoning reiterates stereotypical images of the mafia world as the

domain of an aggressively professional and competitive masculinity, such as the kind portrayed in Hollywood films like the *Godfather* trilogy, with its ongoing refrain that the violence is all business and nothing personal, emotional, or irrational. The government's portrayal of *narco*s holds together around a binary of masculine rationality in contrast to feminine irrationality, a binary spatially organized around men's violent business on the streets in contrast to women's domestic activities. The purported rationality of *narco* businessmen is vital to the government's reassurance that innocent people need not worry.¹⁷ Their story of the drug violence has been repeated by the drug gangs themselves, which post messages on *narcomantas* (drug banners) painted on bedsheets and hurled from the city's bridges, in which they declare themselves to be businessmen with families who do not kill innocent victims.¹⁸ In other words, they may be criminals, but they are still good patriarchs.

Portrayals of the cartels as run by rational businessmen—circulated through the news media, scholarly accounts, the film industry, and other venues—remained largely uncontested until the mid-2000s, when violence erupted along Mexico's northern border, particularly in the cities of Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros. With gun battles waged in city streets, an increasing body count, and an escalation of fear among residents and tourists, the government's story began to ring hollow. As Mexican citizens started to protest the violence, many scholars and journalists questioned the meaning of the violence for the government's ability to govern. Even U.S. officials expressed concerns that a "narco state" was emerging in Mexico, as either a parallel version of the official state or as the force behind the actual governance structure (see, e.g., *Economist* 2009, 30). Mexican government officials argued forcefully against these claims and stuck to their story that the violence was *narcoviolenencia*, perpetrated by criminals against criminals who were not targeting innocents. As the mayor of Nuevo Laredo exclaimed, "The media are being very alarmist. . . . Sure, there is a drug war. But it's between traffickers. The tourists go home safe and sound" (Adams 2005, 1A). The victims were guilty of their crimes, and the criminals kept to their targets; they were not irrational men with guns. This story was put to its initial strongest test in a war of words between then-President Vicente Fox and the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Tony Garza. When Garza issued a travel warning for U.S. tourists

¹⁷ The expansion of journalism and novels on the cartels in Mexico also typically reifies this stereotype of the drug business as run by extremely macho men, who are sadistic and dedicated to their business. See, e.g., Ravelo (2007, 2009) and Cruz (2008).

¹⁸ See *Frontera NorteSur* (2009).

traveling along portions of Mexico's northern border in 2005, then-Mexican Foreign Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez characterized the advisory as "in large measure, exaggerated, and outside the scope of reality," and President Fox implied that the travel advisory represented an attack on the country's sovereignty (Harman 2005, 1). The message from the Mexican government was that, as long as they were not involved in the drug trade, tourists and other civilians had no reason to fear for their safety, since the cartels, the president promised, were "killing each other" in response to government disruptions of their business (Thompson 2005, A4). The flip side to this statement is that under ordinary circumstances, the *narcos* would not be killing each other off, because the violence is bad for business (Thompson and McKinley 2005, A1).

However, shortly after the United States expressed concerns that Mexico was on the verge of becoming a failed state, the newly elected President Felipe Calderon declared "war" against the cartels (Debusmann 2009). Within the year, he deployed thousands of troops to Ciudad Juárez, among other cities, and vowed to quash any doubts regarding the strength of the Mexican state. Since then, the violence has only intensified, each year revealing more horrific murders than the previous, with the body count surpassing all records since the 1910 Revolutionary era.

As the violence worsens, civil and human rights activists, many of them from antifemicide organizations, have challenged the government's story of rational drug violence with the narrative of impunity. Their story is the same as the one told as part of the antifemicide activism: they contest the government's claims that the victims are guilty of the crimes perpetrated against them and that the violence illustrates an intrinsic logic (Human Rights Watch 2010). Rather than a violence that could be justified as cleansing society of criminals, activists have pointed to the violence as evidence of the government's complicity in creating the conditions for it to occur in the first place. As one scholar and activist explained in a May 2008 interview, "They try to say that the *narcos* only kill each other. That's a lie. But people have believed it because it gives false assurances."¹⁹ While the activists do not articulate an explicitly gendered discourse, as when confronting the government's story of public women, they nevertheless critique the intrinsically masculinist analysis of the violence as the work of rational actors. As the informant above put it, "Really what we have are a bunch of crazy men with guns and a state that lets them get away with it. And we can't tell the difference between the violence by *narcos* and the violence by the soldiers. What we do know is that the

¹⁹ Interview, Ciudad Juárez, May 2008.

victims are not guilty.” As another informant explained, “There is no difference right now between the troops and the *narcos*. They both have guns and point them at civilians. That’s all the logic we have here. That is our state.”²⁰ Or another: “If someone tells me to freeze, then I’ll freeze. I don’t need to know if its a *narco* or a soldier. Right now, they are the same. We have nothing but impunity for criminals, and so the state is a criminal too.”²¹

In May 2009, in a call to protest sparked by the murder of a popular university professor, Manuel Arroyo Galván, organizers sharply resisted the government’s lumping of the murder into the category of narcoviolence. “Meny [Manuel Arroyo] was not involved. He is not guilty of anything. He was another innocent killed in this city full of death, full of corpses, full of fear. We are a city dying in fear and sadness,” explained another scholar in a phone conversation in June 2009. In the days after Dr. Arroyo’s murder, protestors organized a march to challenge the explanation of his death as evidence of another criminal taken care of by narcoviolence. Protesters pushed the message of impunity: “We demand justice for all of the murders, kidnappings, and the state of impunity that we suffer in this city!” one activist Web site declared.²²

Still, even with the protests mounting against the discourse of a rational, businesslike narcoviolence, political leaders from the president to the Ciudad Juárez mayor stuck to their story, repeating in interview after interview that the *narcos* are killing each other off (BBC News 2008; Wilkinson 2008). The general in charge of the government’s military strategy for the state of Chihuahua even boasted to activists who protested the military’s killing of some fourteen people in a public shootout that “there are 14 fewer delinquents” (*La Jornada* 2008). He then went on to dismiss the activists as too soft for the hard business of fighting a war. The gendered undertone of his dismissal was not lost on many activists. However, as protests and reports of impunity began to have an impact, political leaders have added a new twist to their story, explaining that the current upsurge in violence represents success of the federal government’s war that has disrupted the quiet coveted by the criminal business leaders. As the federal Attorney General Eduardo Medina told a BBC interviewer in 2008, the violence is indicative of the success that the military presence is having in various Mexican cities (BBC News 2008). Thus, the old

²⁰ Interview, Ciudad Juárez, May 2008.

²¹ Interview, Ciudad Juárez, May 2008.

²² See <http://zapateando.wordpress.com/2009/06/03/marcha-en-protesta-por-el-asesinato-del-maestro-manuel-arroyo-galvan-en-juarez/>.

discourse of the violence as stemming from sources internal to the drug trade has changed to one that identifies the violence as stemming from government actions that have disrupted the trade. The benefits, however, remain the same. As the mayor of Ciudad Juárez explained to the *Los Angeles Times*, the drug war “will end only when both sides have ended up killing each other [off]” (Wilkinson 2008). And then there will be no more violence.

The U.S. government, despite its initial warnings that the violence represented a threat to civilians, has since begun to corroborate the Mexican government’s story of success against the cartels. For instance, in a recent *Voice of America* report, the director of national intelligence, Dennis Blair, assured, “Mexico is in no danger of becoming a failed state. The violence we see now is the result of Mexico taking action against the drug cartels. So it is in fact the result of positive moves, which the Mexican government has taken to break the baneful influence that many of these cartels have had on many aspects of Mexican government and Mexican life” (Homeland Security Newswire 2009). Blair’s statement was recently echoed by the U.S. deputy assistant secretary for counternarcotics, who announced, “We firmly believe the Mexican government is taking the steps that it needs to take and is being quite courageous as it confronts a significant problem. . . . The Mexican people are paying a very high price because drug-fueled organized crime groups are killing each other. But I believe, and I think the Mexican government believes, that only through this sort of very effective, systematic work can they retake the streets” (Whitesides 2009). Again, more violence on the streets means more security, and based on its confidence in the Mexican military strategy the U.S. government has authorized the largest military aid package to Mexico in the history of the two countries.

The Mexican government urges faith in its rationality argument through direct communications with citizens, like a 2009 advisory issued by the Department of Municipal Civil Protection in Chihuahua City. Titled “How to Behave with Hit Men and in Shootouts,” the advisory assures, “Although it may seem incredible, the hit men never confuse [their targets] upon making sure that the [intended] victims are in the car. In case they doubt it, they prefer to stop the car to make sure. And if the person is not the one they are looking for, then they will let him [or her] go” (Quezada Barrón 2009, A1; translation mine). According to the newspaper coverage of this report, the advisory urges its readers to stop their cars, raise their hands, and comply with the hit men’s instructions, which may include providing identification and other personal information. It also reminds the reader that those who owe nothing have

nothing to fear (A1). As the newspaper account explains, the advisory offers further advice for people who are stopped by military patrols, which is identical to the advice for how to behave with hit men. People are advised to stop their cars, raise their hands, and provide identification upon request. Soldiers, like *narco* hit men, are rational actors and will only take you if you have given them a reason to do so.²³ At no point does the communiqué advise people to contact authorities, to request identification from those stopping them, to resist, to scream, or to do anything but freeze and calmly comply.

The government communiqué illustrates a key element of necropolitics as described by Mbembe when he observes that the power of the state materializes in the struggles of armed gangs pitted against armed soldiers, all targeting the civilian population, designated as such by their unarmed status. But it also reveals an aspect of necropolitics that Mbembe leaves unaddressed, the role of gender in creating, as Landes identifies, a mechanism of violence fundamental to the concept of rational states and subjects. The gendering of public and private space creates the social and political context that gives rise to the rational men, whether in soldiers' units or *narco* gangs, who carry guns as evidence of social and political stability.

At the time of this writing, the most concerted critique of Mexican necropolitics is developing in a protest against the president's reaction to a January 31, 2010, massacre of teenagers at a residential birthday party. In response to the news of the carnage the president announced that the violence appeared to be the result of "a rivalry between gangs" (Ellingwood 2010). Protests immediately erupted in the city as the families of the victims refuted the accusation, and they grew as activists joined the families in impromptu press conferences that captured headlines around the world (Cardona 2010). Through their protests, the story of impunity gained strength against the government's story of *narcos* killing *narcos*, and the Calderón administration organized a meeting between the president and the protestors in the city. President Calderón's arrival was met with further protests, led largely by victims' families. Several mothers of the slain children stood with their backs to the president and received boisterous applause when one yelled out: "Enough with your war!" (Wilkinson 2010).

²³ I am grateful to Molly Molloy for bringing my attention to this article and for sending it to the Frontera-list that she manages. Her postings have helped me tremendously in this research.

Conclusion

Despite the many similarities linking the blame-the-victim discourses about public women and drug gangs, current protestors face an uphill struggle to subvert governmental efforts to represent the dead bodies as evidence of state success in disrupting the drug business. Antifemicide activists have made many strides in weakening the discourse of public women as they successfully organized a transnational social justice movement that led to legal reforms within Mexico and international pressure on its government, but they have a long fight ahead if they are to succeed in dismantling the story of drug violence as perpetrated by criminals against one another. Feminist scholars can help in this endeavor by exposing how discourses of a rational masculinity contribute to violence, to the silencing of citizens, and to state-sanctioned impunity. Just as feminist scholars provided the term femicide, which has proven so valuable to activists in northern Mexico, feminists could help subvert the logic that depicts drug violence as a productive development.

Postcolonial scholars such as Mbembe, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, who identify a politics as the work of death within the messy interactions linking the production of the state to the reproduction of its subjects, provide helpful tools in recognizing the Mexican government's politics of violence for what it is. The dead provide the raw materials for this politics; their bodies, their gender, their location, and their scars and mutilations are the basis for weaving tales of public women and rational drug lords. Their deaths are politically significant for the government's justifications of its measures to protect the lives of Ciudad Juárez residents as necropolitics meets biopolitics in the city streets. However, the phenomenon is incomprehensible without a feminist analysis of the patriarchal state ideology that undergirds the violent status quo.

As with feminist critiques of universal narratives that have been instrumental to pointing out limitations in understandings of global capitalism, human rights, and citizenship movements (see, e.g., Gibson-Graham 1996), feminist analyses are needed to illuminate the gaps in universalist depictions of the necropolitical and biopolitical forces at play in politics, economics, and culture. The reproduction of subjects does not occur in a blanket fashion such that unarmed civilians emerge as those targeted by marauding men in the same way everywhere around the world. Rather, understanding the actual mechanisms of necropolitics requires engaged critique that connects the social negotiations of identity, including negotiations over identifying the dead, which vary across contexts. Given the pervasiveness of gender as a political matrix for reproducing such

binaries as rationality and irrationality, public and private, virtue and contagion, and legitimate and illegitimate citizens, gender must be addressed if scholars of the politics of war, of terrorism, and of death are to speak meaningfully to activists and scholars who engage with these politics in the places where they live and build their political communities.

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