LAS MUJERES DEL OTRO LADO: A CRITIQUE OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF MEXICAN WOMEN AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

By

Adriana Martinez-Fernandez

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Hispanic Cultural Studies

2011

ABSTRACT

LAS MUJERES DEL OTRO LADO: A CRITIQUE OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF MEXICAN WOMEN AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

By

Adriana Martinez-Fernandez

This dissertation analyzes cultural representations of Mexican border women and their interactions with their political and social environment. Short stories, novels, documentaries, plays, testimonial literature and films on the Mexican women *at* the U.S.-Mexico border are crucial to the understanding of gendered constructions at *la frontera*, as they formulate a metacommentary to a variety of complex issues 'on the ground.' That is to say, the portrayals of border women unquestionably attest to often-clashing perspectives on culture, nation, sexuality and class.

This dissertation focuses on the following texts: Chapter 1 centers on Ciudad Juárez, examining Alicia Gaspar de Alba's novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) and the documentary film *La Batalla de las Cruces* (2005), directed by Rafael Bonilla. These texts have been chosen because their portrayals of *juarense* women address the discourse of victimization from different perspectives within the context of the hundreds of murders of women that have afflicted this city with impunity since 1993. These texts reflect the paradoxes that emerge either from underlining the helpless condition of the victims or from creating a public persona for the activists campaigning against the murders. Chapter 2, which deals with the depictions of women from Tijuana, uses three short stories by Rosina Conde and the documentary *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (2006) by directors Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre, Ackowledging that in Tijuana the figure of the prostitute and other "public women" constantly appear as symbolic presences, these texts best address reinterpretations and recreations of the "public woman," with

all of its paradoxical negotiations, from contrasting feminist perspectives. Chapter 3 centers on the feature films *Bread and Roses* (2000) and *La Misma Luna* (2007) and the testimonies compiled by Alicia Alarcón *La migra me hizo los mandados [The Border Patrol Ate my Dust]* (2002) in order to study the portrayals of women migrants, These texts are analyzed through the discussion of the iconic Malinche, as all women represented in them are touched, in one way or another, by the shadow of La Malinche. This Mexican icon symbolically interacts with the female protagonists of these texts as they are also risking being associated with the "treachery" of leaving their own culture and accepting a different culture as migrants. Finally, Chapter 4 examines the representation of the women who stay in Mexico while their loved ones leave to cross *la frontera*, through the play *Mujer on the border* (2005), adapted by María Muro and Marta Aura, and the documentary film *Letters from the Other Side* (2006), by Heather Courtney. These cultural representations are poignant because the women characterized in them present ambivalent responses to traditional roles as mothers and to the forces of globalization. This chapter explores how the antithetical forces of resistance and acquiescence affect the women who stay.

The imaginary created by the U.S.-Mexico border generates paradoxical interconnections between the private and the public, between reproductive and productive women's work, between traditional and non-traditional women's roles. At the intersection of gender and sexuality, national identity and globalization, this study examines how the representations of Mexican border women paradoxically contribute to both erasing *and* reifying sexualized and maternal stereotypes while also *performing* a circumscribed agency, which fits the inherent ambivalence of the border.

Copyright by
ADRIANA MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ
2011

A mis dos chicos, motor de este trabajo,
el uno aliento desde el principio, el otro mi mayor orgullo.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could not have been completed without the staunch support of many; particularly those who never failed to provide love, understanding and encouragement throughout my time in Michigan and in Canada.

My most sincere gratitude goes to all my teachers in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese; each one of them served as a role model for the profession that I cherish; each class and discussion an example of the intellectual honesty and passion that I hope to instill in my students. My heartfelt thanks goes to my directors, Miguel Cabañas and Sheila Contreras, for inspiring, supporting and challenging me throughout this project. I also wish to acknowledge the other members of my committee, Eduardo Guízar and Joseba Gabilondo, for their guidance and shared ideas. Dagmar Herzog and Peter Beattie also contributed to this dissertation by greatly affecting my reflections on feminism and Latin America. I am most grateful to Prof. Douglas Noverr for his interest in my project, for attending my defense and for his useful comments on my dissertation.

The Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the College of Arts and Letters gave me much support and encouragement when I was a graduate student at Michigan State University, contributing greatly to my academic development and to the research this dissertation is based on. Particularly, I wish to mention the 2006 Johannes Sachse Memorial Award and the 2004 Departmental Retention Award for academic excellence that my department granted me when I was beginning my doctoral studies, as their belief in my potential motivated me immeasurably. Research awards received from this unit and from the College of Arts and Letters also allowed me to visit Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana and Austin, Texas in 2007 in order to conduct research and

attain an invaluable experiential feel for *la frontera*. In this trip, the generous help of Rosario San Miguel, Socorro Tabuenca, Julia Monárrez and José Manuel Valenzuela was priceless! From picking us up at the airport to agreeing to interviews to helping us cross the border, their assistance will always be appreciated and remembered. I also wish to profusely thank the talented Marta Aura, who so kindly sent me the script of *Mujer on the border* without even knowing me, thus allowing me to have access to this pivotal text. Finally, without the fellowships granted to me by the College of Arts and Letters, I simply would not have been able to finish this project. I am so grateful that they chose to present me with the 2008 Merit Fellowship Award, the 2009 Dissertation Completion Fellowship and the Summer Support Fellowship that same year, not only because of the funding but also because of the faith in this project evinced by their generous support. I also wish to thank Pearson College, my alma mater and current employer, for the monies provided as professional development to continue writing through the summer of 2010.

Many friends, colleagues and family stood by me and motivated my writing in ways too numerous to count: from offering advice and reading parts of the manuscript, to being example of professionalism and showing me that *¡sí se puede!,* to having coffee, great food, beer or a swim, to helping me move and simply by cheering me on and growing up with me. Carmen Albaladejo, Natalia Ruiz, Isabel Álvarez, Gustavo Rodríguez, Bicho Azevedo, Amanda Smith, María Teresa Beltrán, Steve and Alana Tuckey, Tim Ball, Deb Stetler, Jane E. Freer and Christian Bock: mil gracias, por todo. I also want to thank profoundly my family in Mexico for their unconditional love, their visits and their sharing of adventures since I moved al Norte. To all mis tías, my mom, my dad, my brother Andrés and his about-to-expand family, there are not enough words to thank you. Abuelita, gracias por cuidarme y cuidarnos. Te extraño mucho.

This day would not have come without my husband and the love of my life, Jim Freer, who believed in my abilities when I wouldn't and has been my rock y mi faro since we met. I couldn't have hoped for a better life partner and I look forward to many more years together and to sitting at his graduation one day. This dissertation is dedicated to him and to our son Aidan Marcos, may he read it one day as I remember our first real summer together, me typing these pages as he napped, hoping that the inequities that so incensed me with regards to *la frontera y mi México* have either vanished as a bad dream or are battles he will choose to successfully fight.

PREFACE

The process that originally encouraged my critical thinking around the topic of textual representations of Mexican border women holds important parallelisms with the notions that are central to this study. I had been living in the United States for several years as a graduate student, mostly focusing my academic interests in the portrayal of women in literature, with a particular interest in the textual subversions hidden in these depictions, when I took a course in Border Literatures with Prof. Sheila Contreras which made me question my own locus of representation. For the first time I realized that my position as a Spanish-speaking Mexicana, from Mexico City, was not exactly subversive in comparison to other identities. In fact, in some Chicana narratives, such as Michele Serros's *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, Mexicanas like me were almost hegemonic, reacting disparagingly to the protagonist's attempts to learn Spanish in a study abroad program in Mexico. The further understanding of the complexities of border characterizations made me appreciate the centralization prevalent in the views of non-border Mexicans, including my own at that point, and how these views help maintain bias in relation to the borderlands.

As I continued to reflect on my own position, I eventually came to a surprising realization: over the years, without being aware of it, this supposedly far-away border had been slowly seeping into my own identity as a migrant. I had experienced a displacement of sorts in my time in the United States: not purely Mexicana anymore by virtue of prolonged non-residence, and not Chicana either, because my early socialization had not taken place in the United States, plus I had no claim to a history of Anglo oppression and civil rights struggles. It seemed the border had crossed me in more ways that I had anticipated… And still, even as I was

fully aware of the many privileges I had in comparison with other Mexicanas touched by the border, the identification with these women is what ultimately brought me to delve into textual representations of *mexicanas de la frontera*, looking for sites of resistance to what initially seemed quite stereotyped and victimized portrayals.

Thus came the interest in studying a topic that could bridge and cross the U.S.-Mexico border in search of a deeper, critical understanding of the cultural powers that compete in the creations and re-creations of Mexican border women. When I began this project four and a half years ago my guiding questions were very different and frankly, quite broad… Indeed, it would appear that I was naively striving to cross the border without being crossed by it. Or maybe a more apt metaphor is that I was trying to cross it by plane rather than doing it on foot. In the end, my journey had to go through the longer route of examining each representation in its own setting within *la frontera* in order to be able to theorize about the consequences and the origins of such portrayals. I do not consider this product to be a finished one even at this stage, which is fortunate, because my interest in the border and my own crossings only multiplied with time. Positioned from yet another border, I look forward to exploring more representations of migrants, mothers and public women as I continue to find my own critical voice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.
***Mujeres mexicanas* on the border: A crossroads of representation, interpretation and re-signification**……………………………………………………………………1

Chapter 1.
***Mujer constante más allá de la muerte* or, (The) overpowering constructions of feminicide in Ciudad Juárez.**……………………………………………………………29
1.1 *Desert Blood*, or *Pobre Juárez…Tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de sus víctimas*……………………………………………………………………………..34
1.2 *La Batalla de las Cruces*, or The activists strike back……………………………….56
1.3 Reimagining the public woman as a matter of life or death: *Mujeres de Juárez*……………………………………………………………………………..77

Chapter 2.
Welcome to Tijuana, city of public women.…………………………………………………..81
2.1 *Mujer que publica, mujer pública*: Rosina and Tijuana…………………..…………85
2.2 Tijuana or *Maquilápolis*?: Between the private and the public *woman*….…………108
2.3 The alpha and the omega: *Mujeres de Tijuana*….……………………………...…129

Chapter 3.
***Malinches, madres, migrantes:* Mexican women on the move.**……………………………..132
3.1 *Bread and Roses* or, Manufacturing *neo-malinchista* dissent……………………...136
3.2 All about my (Mexican) mother: *Evadiendo a la Malinche en La Misma Luna*……………………………………………………………………………...157
3.3 *Las migrantes por escrito*: The post-malinchista journeys of La Malinche……………………………………………………………….………………179
3.4 La mujer migrante or, *Malinche reloaded*…..…………………….……………….201

Chapter 4.
Migration and women in Mexico or, *la que espera, desespera.* …....………….………………204
4.1 The revenge of *la mater dolorosa*: Gendered ambivalence in *Mujer on the Border*……………………………………………………………….……..208
4.2 *Letters from the Other Side* or Penélope a la mexicana…………………….………229
4.3 *"Ahora estoy sola, sola sin ti. /Hoy te vi partir."* The dialectics of the woman who did not leave……………………………………………………………251

Conclusion.
Tras-pasando la frontera: Women beyond the crossroads………………….…………...253

Works cited.……………………………..…………………………………………….265

Introduction. *Mujeres mexicanas* on the border: A crossroads of representation, interpretation and re-signification.

The borderline between Mexico and the United States is 1,969 miles long. Its actual physical length might seem immense and yet it is negligible when compared to its symbolic importance. More than a mere artificial divider between two countries, *la línea* is a monumental metaphorical wall between two worlds that tend to construct themselves in opposition to each other, particularly since the current U.S.-Mexico border has been a site of conflict and upheaval since its establishment in 1848.[1] The U.S.-Mexico border crisscrosses imagined identities far beyond national states, genders, languages and actual physical locations. It is forever inscribed in the hearts and minds of the migrants who cross it in search of their promised land, in the memories and the dreams of those who have a loved one *del otro lado* and, of course, in the hopes and fears of those who live its day to day, whether in Ciudad Juárez or El Paso, in Tijuana or San Diego.

On the surface, it is easy to view this border in dichotomies, given the abysmal differences in political and economic power between the two countries that share this locus of representation. In fact, *la frontera* and the identities associated with it repeatedly appear in a variety of cultural representations in terms of opposing binaries: *Norte y Sur*, rich and poor, beginning and end, *civilización y barbarie* [civilization and barbarism], powerful and weak (Noble 147).[2] While these antithetic images do bespeak of inequalities that become central to the

---

[1] The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in this year and the 1853 Gadsen Purchase are the most commonly accepted temporal markers of the constitution of the border in its present form, following the Texas rebellion in 1836 and the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 (Martínez xiv).

[2] Translations from Spanish will be my own unless stated otherwise. Some common expressions in Spanish will not be translated.

discussion of borderlands identities, they certainly do not allow for nor honor the fluidity and the porosity of what is, after all, an arbitrary division, a line that is literally and metaphorically crossed with and without documents millions of times a year. Moreover, given that the negative connotations of these dichotomies are mostly assigned to the Mexican side, a closer look should be warranted, one that recognizes at the same time as it questions these rather one-sided depictions while it inquires the origins and maintenance of this symbolic status quo.

The supposed inferiority in the Mexican side of the border becomes even more problematic when the question of gender comes to the fore. Consequently, Mexican women who are positioned around the border are repeatedly portrayed in ways that tend to marginalize them: from the abject prostitute to the foreign-loving migrant, from the silent victims of feminicide and globalization to the helpless women left behind in the Mexican heartland. And yet, it could be argued that each one of these representations, precisely because of the damaging symbols and archetypes attached to them, contain crucial clues to the understanding of the complexities of the U.S.-Mexico border. In other words, the images of these *mujeres de la frontera* [border women] undeniably inform of the cultural clashes that surround the border as a particular locus of representation.[3] Furthermore, it could also be contended that all of these depictions can be re-signified or even allocated a "positive" counterpart that denotes subversion, voice or visibility where at first glance one may have perceived compliance, silence and invisibility. These re-significations may challenge the other disregarded and "maligned" representations but they may also put into question traditional feminine icons that are intrinsic to the Mexican imaginary and

[3] At this point, it seems appropriate to clarify that by "border women" I mean all women touched by the border, either by their own migration or that of their relatives, as well as actual inhabitants of the border area. While the consideration of Mexican-American women whose families have lived in the border area before the two nations produced the current demarcation would have greatly enriched this study, at this point it will remain as an opportunity for future research.

not automatically associated with the border, such as the symbol of a "properly" abnegated and virtuous Mexican mother. In these discussions, we must take into account that all of these depictions constitute textual "bodies" that work as representational sites of gender and power. As a result, not only Mexican women's bodies but also their portrayals emerge as critical sites of power struggles where often-clashing perspectives on the notions of culture, nation, sexuality and class collide at the U.S.-Mexico border. It is precisely in this vital locus of conflict, interpretation and re-signification that I locate the present study of textual representations of *mujeres mexicanas* at the border.

A few specific examples of the conceptual intersections where these depictions of Mexican border women materialize will suffice to illustrate how their presence —even when it is persistently touted as marginal— is actually a fundamental part of the paradoxical nature of the U.S.-Mexico border imaginary. Firstly, I will consider one of the most salient and disturbing traits that the most negative portrayals of Mexican border women share: disproportionate sexualization.[4] In this respect, Rosa Linda Fregoso argues that *fronterizas* are routinely viewed from a neocolonialist viewpoint, where there is a habitual "construction of Mexicanas on the border in terms of sexual excess and chaos" (*MeXicana Encounters* 11). This characterization appears at a juncture where both nationalist and patriarchal mechanisms of control are produced. From these perspectives, Mexican women who are associated with the border easily become "contaminated" by all that is *different* and thus must be either brought back to "proper" Mexican (read traditional, non-sexual) ways or exploited (mostly sexually but through their labor as well) in order to be controlled and kept at bay. And while I would not agree to this sexualization being

[4] Sexualization is a theoretical term that will be developed at large in ensuing pages of this introduction. In general, it alludes to the representation of women that accentuates an assumed sexual availability as well as an implied sexual subordination to men.

regarded as positive, we should point out its potential for destabilization of the hegemonic discourse, which appears to merit taking such measures of cultural domination as the creation and maintenance of the hypersexualized stereotype.

The second issue to be considered here is national identity, particularly as characterized by nationalist viewpoints stemming from both countries involved. These standpoints, namely the one from centralist Mexico and the one coming from xenophobic U.S.-American interests, arrive at the border junction via the "easy" route of defining the *Nation* as "orderly, civilized and strong," the antithesis of everything *la frontera* stands for. With these adjectives, these imagined Nations characterize themselves in traditionally "masculine" (read patriarchal) terms, therefore circumscribing the border area and its associated identities within their *feminized* opposites:[5] "chaotic, uncultured and vulnerable."[6] These nationalist portrayals clearly bespeak of the essentialism prevalent in border imaginaries, essentialism this study aims to deconstruct.

These binary associations may be initially elucidated by considering Rolando Romero's assertion that ambivalent feelings of fear and desire are routinely projected into the portrayals of the U.S.-Mexico border region, thus impacting national and regional identities in ways that reflect both the angst and the lust motivated by the presence of the different ("Border of Fear" 37).[7] More specifically, María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba has observed how these visions motivated by anxiety and fascination elicit the parallel phenomena of "South of the Borderism"

---

[5] I will also further expand on the theoretical concept of "feminization" in subsequent pages of this introduction. For the moment, it can be explained as "related to what is traditionally considered feminine."

[6] Gloria Anzaldúa's vision of women *according to* patriarchal religions resonates here, "woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself" (39).

[7] In her analysis of border films, Andrea Noble seems to echo Romero's perception: "In the U.S. cultural imaginary, Mexico figures not only as a primitive, lawless hinterland, but also […] as an exotic and liberating avenue of escape. In the Mexican imaginary meanwhile, the United States is both a hostile neocolonialist power and a site of a deeply coveted capitalist modernity" (147).

and “North of the Borderism” (“Sketches” 498). The first one alludes to ambivalent Anglo stereotypes of Mexicans, which oscillate between the romantic and the highly sexualized, the festive and the lazy, the folkloric and the uncivilized. From my perspective, in *el Norte* the reaction to these clichés is mostly twofold, as on the one hand they help to entertain the paranoid idea of a “migrant invasion” while on the other hand, they provoke a response of disregard: Mexico and its boorish inhabitants should be ignored as a politically inferior people. The second phenomenon that Tabuenca Córdoba refers to is the Mexican centralist need to “guard the nationalist fort” of “proper” *mexicanidad* by Othering anyone linked to the borders —but particularly border denizens— by means of associating them in general with degeneration and violence (“Sketches” 498). I will extrapolate from Romero’s and Tabuenca Córdoba’s proposals that Mexican border women can be thusly interpreted from dominant cultural perspectives as antithetical and even menacing to the concept of an “ideal” national identity as their representations become stereotyped and enmeshed in fear and desire. I would also like to propose that it is precisely in this “threat,” in this failure of dominant nationalist discourses to “neatly” contain the image of *las mexicanas fronterizas* within the idea of the Nation that a more empowering re-signification from the margins could be found, a redo that favors *in-between* spaces like the borderlands instead of fictional, idyllically-unified Nations.[8]

The final intersection for the portrayal of Mexican border women operates under the emblem of globalization. Néstor García Canclini defines globalization in a particularly insightful way because he understands it as a series of interconnected cultural and economic processes that “*reorder* differences and inequalities without suppressing them” (García Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada* 49, emphasis mine). Marianne Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan

[8] Homi K. Bhabha referred to the in-between as “a space of representation that threatens binary division with its difference” (“DissemiNation” 299).

prefer the term "global restructuring" to globalization "to better capture the multi-dimensional, multi-speed, and disjuncted nature of this economic, political, social, and cultural phenomenon" (1). Both definitions emphasize the *complex* nature of globalization, which I understand as a set of interrelated practices that socioeconomically, perpetuate global disparities while at the same time expose cultural attempts at homogenization and the geopolitical responses to the imaginary associated with a globalized world. Globalization, then, as an ever-shifting sociocultural, political and economic system, necessarily complicates the textual construction of Mexican women at the border. This is particularly so because globalization works on practices of "homogeneización y, a la vez, de fraccionamiento articulado del mundo" ["homogenization and, at the same time, an articulated fracturing of the world"] that introduce a "new" order of existing disparities for the world's poor (García Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada* 49). That is to say, the inequalities that exist pre-globalization only become reorganized with this multifaceted phenomenon.

On the one hand, it is easy to agree with Marchand and Sisson Runyan who point out that under certain critiques of neoliberalism "gender operates to naturalize, justify, and perpetuate global restructuring as relations of domination" (16). In other words, gender imbalances under patriarchal schemes may certainly become validated and even exacerbated by the inequalities of global capitalism. And yet, globalization does provoke certain displacements as extra-domestic work and opportunities for migration that could, conceivably, counter some of the more conservative tenets of Mexican patriarchal structures, such as the desired confinement of women to the domestic space. However, this relatively more positive and paradoxical outcome of globalization is virtually non-existent in current representations of Mexican border women where instead, "the subordination of women to economic development" is emphasized, a situation that

maintains and “aggravates their second-class citizen status in border society” (López-Lozano 148). This inferior position of women within globalization could be partly explained as a reactionary response by the Mexican nationalist, centrist perspective that, while coveting the modernity that globalization promises, also perceives this socioeconomic phenomenon as undermining its “core” national values; and therefore must be opposed by promoting cultural representations —such as the “barbaric” border zone— that blame globalization for the Nation’s predicaments.[9] Another explanation of women’s substandard status within globalization would contemplate the role of transnational neoliberalism “to further cheapen women’s labor in the workplace” while dictating a crisis of “reproductive labor in the home, through the dismantlement of the welfare state” (Marchand and Sisson Runyan 13).[10] This interconnection between the private and the public, between reproductive and productive women’s work, between traditional and non-traditional women’s roles is palpably played out in the portrayals at the center of this dissertation.

These brief sketches and approximations regarding textual representations of Mexican border women set the scene for a more detailed analysis. My work investigates personal identity positions, as well as the pervasiveness of cultural bias, so present in all contacts with border representations. I would hope that my contribution to the fields of border and globalization studies went beyond having a time-specific relevance, particularly since these are areas where the production of research is quite considerable and current. In fact, cultural border matters such as bilingualism, *fronterizo* artistic manifestations and debates over “national” identities have

[9] I am aware that the Nation’s depiction of *la frontera* as barbaric is much older than globalization but the new economic world order has certainly helped to stress this uncouth image.

[10] While the existence of a welfare state in Mexico is debatable, the rising deficiencies in public care are more than evident.

been gaining importance since the 90s in both academic and political discussions in Mexico and the United States (Maciel and Herrera-Sobek 18). That being said, the fact that the majority of these studies have their origins in the U.S.-American academia appears to make them more one-sided —either focusing solely on Mexico or on the United States. This study tries to bring a fresh outlook on cultural production from both sides of the border. In doing so, this dissertation intends to advance an overdue dialogue between U.S.-American academics and the relatively unexplored —in the United States— intellectual positions from the Mexican side. In particular, this analysis aims to bridge a linguistic/cultural/historical barrier between U.S.-American and Chican@ studies on the one side and Mexican scholarship on the other. This study examines literature and film in both English and Spanish, originating from both Mexico and the United States, exploring these texts through the theoretical lenses of cultural studies and feminism, again, from both sides of the border. From a *holistic* perspective, this analysis expands the symbolic reach of the border far beyond its actual physical space, attempting to trace and investigate common axes of interpretation in seemingly disparate portrayals such as those of women who cross the border, who live the border in Juárez and Tijuana, or whose loved ones have left for the border.

In order to investigate the four representations of women that are the focus of this dissertation, a variety of texts were selected: three documentaries, two feature films, one novel, a selection of short stories, a compilation of testimonies and the script of a play. The documentaries are *La batalla de las cruces* (2005), *Letters from the Other Side* (2006), and *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (2006). The feature films are *Bread and Roses* (2000) and *La misma luna* (2007), the novel is *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005), the short stories are a selection extracted from Rosina Conde's *En la tarima* (2001) and *Arrieras somos* (1994), the

testimonies were compiled in *La migra me hizo los mandados [The Border Patrol Ate my Dust]* (2002) and the play is *Mujer on the border* (2005). For each representation —of the women of Juárez, of migrant women, of the women who stay in Mexico but are affected by the migration of others and of the women of Tijuana— at least a pair of texts was chosen following a simple principle: that they originate in a different side of the border and that they had the particular portrayal of border women at their core.[11] This condition in turn ensured that each portrayal would have at least one text that was aimed for a Spanish-speaking audience and another one that was meant for an English-speaking audience, so that the element of intended reception could be considered within the analysis of the general message.

While variety in genres and media was certainly desired, it was not the overarching rule for the selection of the texts. Availability proved to be a more important issue and thus the number of documentaries studied here can be explained, as they are a common form of representing social topics related to the U.S.-Mexico border. Additionally, the choice of texts was also guided, in the case where there were options to choose from, by whether the depiction in the text presented an alternative to the stereotypically marginalized and victimized representations of Mexican women at the border or not. The "less negative" portrayal was usually preferred, as it would allow for a re-reading that considered the possibility of agency, even if limited, in what is typically a disempowered scenario for women.[12] An added

[11] The only representation that is discussed through three texts is that of women migrants. The "additional" text, *La misma luna* (2007), had been recently released when the chapter was in the process of being written but the adequacy of its main character to the chapter's emphasis was too suitable not to include it.

[12] For example, in the case of the women of Juárez, *La batalla de las cruces* was preferred as the text "in Spanish" over the novel *2666* (2004) as the latter did not even remotely consider the activist as a representation for *juarense* women, keeping to the silent victim of feminicide

consideration was that the release date of the chosen texts was a relatively recent one, in order to examine the most current cultural production inspired by *la frontera*. Finally, each text was selected because it was deemed to offer a unique perspective to the particular problems posed by each of the depictions: the widespread victimization present in the case of *las juarenses*, the accusation of *malinchismo* for the women migrants, the "stigma of abandonment" for those who stayed in Mexico and the conundrum posed by the slighted figure of the "public woman" for *las tijuanenses*.

Having clarified the specific importance of these enquiries and once having delimited the corpus of the dissertation, this section will contextualize the topic within the most identifiable scholarship. But before we proceed, a brief socio-historical overview of the border in the 20th century may be useful. Although conflict and interdependence seem to be keywords in the socio-historical analysis of any border (Martínez xiii), it could be argued that in the case of *la frontera*, these paradigmatic terms have even more relevance. Some fundamental moments that illustrate this point are: on the one hand, the volatility produced by the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which evoked the 19th century tensions that surrounded the creation of the border as it is today and gave us the icon of the *bandido* in its most classical form. On the other hand, there was the 1920's Era of Prohibition in the United States, which made boomtowns out of cities like Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana in the Mexican side —effectively creating their reputation as sin cities (Martínez xiv). Bootlegging and alcohol-related "tourism" were not only the more *notorious* sources of income at the time (even if clearly not the only ones) but also the occupations that contributed the most to the construction of border figures such as the smuggler and the bar girl

---

throughout. As for the women migrants, *La misma luna* was deemed as having more empowered portrayals of women than the feature film *Babel* (2006); thus the motive behind its selection.

(forerunners of the modern *coyote* and table dancer/stripper). Other chronological landmarks include the Depression and the end of Prohibition in 1933 which busted these same Mexican border cities temporarily, the Bracero program of the 1940s, which initiated massive rural Mexican migration to *la frontera* and eventually to the U.S.-American Southwest; the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) which effectively started the *maquiladoras* in 1965, and the much-criticized but still strong North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which officially began in 1994 (Martínez xvi, xvii). Migrants and maquiladora workers would seem to be the most noticeable representations resulting from these latest events, which would explain in a way the anonymity of the portrayals that deal with some of the peoples more profoundly affected by NAFTA, especially the Mexican farmers who have lost the greater part of their livelihoods to migration and to the unfair advantages given to their competitors in the United States and Canada via agricultural subsidies and industrial farming production that Mexico cannot match.[13]

The social sciences at times engage in these types of analyses, as well as the field of cultural studies. My own endeavor evidently corresponds to the latter but I will acknowledge some of the trailblazers in social border studies as their work has significantly informed and inspired my own. One of the first analyses on this topic, *Women on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (1987), edited by Vicki Ruiz and Susan Tiano, specifically addressed the influence that women have on the U.S.-Mexico border area in terms of labor, socioeconomics and cultural identity, as well as the changes in gender roles and work patterns brought forth by their living in the

[13] Source: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/02/01/index.php?section=politica&article=008n2pol>

region.[14] Ruiz and Tiano's book challenges stereotypical views of passive, docile Mexican women who "don't need" to work. While this work is somewhat dated, it did open up a field of research that would change dramatically as globalization evolved and some of its nastier side effects became more visible in the 1990s, such as the prominence of drug trafficking and undocumented crossings across the border, the industrial pollution in Tijuana, or the feminicides in Juárez.

On this last issue —central to this dissertation because of its implications for the characterization of women as victims— the work of Mexican sociologist Julia Monárrez Fragoso stands out. She has proposed that "this social phenomenon is tied into the patriarchal system that predisposes, to a lesser or greater degree, that women be murdered" ("Feminicidio" 15). And while such a statement might seem extreme, it is worth noting because of its insistence in pointing out an endemic misogyny, present throughout Mexican society but arguably exacerbated at the border.[15] By taking into account social class as a factor in her analysis, Monárrez hints at the lack of economic means as a primary cause in these women's inability to lead a life without sexual violence ("Feminicidio" 17). We can understand this claim as part of a

---

[14] Also among the first scholars to provide an empirical view of historical, economic and even linguistic conditions on the U.S.-Mexico border, the work of Mexican sociologist Jorge A. Bustamante should be noted. He was also the founder of what I consider to be the premier Mexican institution in the field of border studies, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF). However, in one of his most frequently quoted books, *Cruzar la Línea: La Migración de México a los Estados Unidos* (1997), it is surprising that we do not find a significant consideration of gender, seeming that the sociological tendency of this particular work still assumes migration and borderlands problems primarily as male issues.

[15] It is noteworthy that one of the most overlooked items that these murders have in common is the prevalence of intra-familiar violence as a direct cause. Studies conducted by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte place this factor as the second largest category of motives for feminicide in Juárez (Monárrez, "Las Diversas Representaciones" 362). The first category is termed "sexual systemic feminicide."

discourse about empowered (masculine) and disempowered (feminine) bodies, which becomes exacerbated by the border's —and particularly Juárez's— atmosphere of illegality.

Disempowerment conjures up the figure of the migrant, particularly the undocumented one, especially when considering the vulnerability of their indeterminate status in a foreign land. In her analysis of women migrants, sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo broke ground with her book *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (1994), which positioned itself empirically against the preconceived notions of 'male-only' Mexican migration or even the idea that Mexican women always migrate unwillingly. While it seems to be true that men in general have initiated the move north, it is significantly the women who solidify settlement in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 12). Hondagneu-Sotelo found two basic types of family migration, both implying significant gender role negotiations.[16] The fact that these gendered compromises are not even remotely part of the imaginary on the Mexican migration experience is quite pertinent as it is revealing of the power of representation in the sense of showing the influence dominant cultural discourses such as *machismo* have in depicting women migrants in a variety of inferior, not empowered, ways.

It is precisely in the terrain of representation where cultural theorists have examined the border as a construct and a metaphor. No study in this field could fail to acknowledge the input of Chicana writer and critic Gloria Anzaldúa who, when she characterized the U.S.-Mexican border as "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25), situated herself amongst the pioneers of an academic discussion that has traversed disciplines for

[16] The first type, the "family stage migration" where men travel first, had the unintended consequence of women's economic independence as they were usually left behind for significant periods of time (Hondagneu-Sotelo 65). In the second type, "family unit migration" where families move together, Hondagneu-Sotelo observed a style of conjugal power that had already been shared or negotiated to some extent in order to prepare for the journey (79).

over two decades now. For the present discussion, Anzaldúa's characterization of borderlands women is fundamental as a model of Third-wave feminist critique that boldly and intimately considers issues of class, gender and race within the imaginary of the U.S.-Mexico border. Moreover, the particular image that I have quoted as opening Anzaldúa's book is very informative with respect to the subordination with which the Mexican side of the border is represented, a telling indication of how *victimized* Mexican women's portrayals around the border tend to be. Anzaldúa's interrogations of patriarchal cultural mores, as well as the basic tenets that compose her "new mestiza conciosuness" such as her "tolerance for ambiguity" resonate deeply with the representations covered in this work, as the identities studied here are also bound to navigate between cultures due to their vital intersections with *la frontera* (99, 101). Throughout her pivotal work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), one can find echoes of the complexities that underlie this study, as she highlights the cultural impact of the figure of La Malinche, the struggles of borderlands culture and language and the culturally-imposed expectation of abnegation for women (Anzaldúa 44, 40). And yet, maybe because of the time that has passed since Anzaldúa released this radical book, some critics have called into question what could be seen as a tendency to "essentialize relations between Mexico and the United States" (Castillo and Tabuenca 15).[17]

At the same time that Anzaldúa's possibly essentializing discourse has been questioned, so have other points of view from renowned border theorists such as Héctor Calderón, José David Saldívar and Emily Hicks, who have argued for the metaphorical disarticulation or even the erasure of the border (Castillo and Tabuenca 14). One can contend that this extremely

[17] I find Anzaldúa's implicit claim to a singular borderlands *woman* more problematic than her possible essentialization of the national interactions at the border, as it does not fully contemplate the multiplicity of identities that this study strives to examine.

theoretical position could have the effect of deleting the inequalities at the core of the border experience, therefore privileging the U.S-American side of this equation. Ethnographer Pablo Vila has even warned against the homogenizing tendencies of studies such as these, as they "construct the *border crosser* or the *hybrid* (in some cases the Latin American international immigrant in general, but in others the Chicano in particular […]) into *a new 'privileged subject of history'*" (*Ethnography* 307, emphasis in original). This "positive" bias in the theorization of the border is not exclusive by any means to U.S.-American scholars, and in a certain way some of the writings of Walter Mignolo and Néstor García-Canclini can exemplify this point.

In his consideration of globalization from a Latin American socio-historical perspective, Walter Mignolo, in *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000), proposes that border knowledge *is* necessarily subaltern —in opposition to hegemonic knowledge— and that it represents a new *locus* of enunciation (13). These subaltern epistemologies —in opposition to the hegemonic, which stress denotation and "truth"— inevitably place an opposing emphasis on performativity and transformation (Mignolo 26). Thus, "borders install in the imaginary of the modern/colonial world system an other logic, not territorial, [but] based on center, semiperipheries, and peripheries" (Mignolo 36).[18] And while it must be recognized that Mignolo's proposal certainly opens a space for these alternative border identities "to speak" —a position central to my own work— and he seems right in pointing out the performative nature of border thinking, I would also warn against what I interpret as excessive optimism in gauging the influence of the periphery in the center's imaginary, particularly when these margins are gendered.

Néstor García Canclini is best known as one of the most influential scholars coming from the Mexican academia with regards to the discussion about globalization, popular culture, urban

[18] For Mignolo, "modernity […] carries on its shoulders the heavy weight and responsibility of coloniality" (37).

landscapes and the amalgamation of all these factors. His insights on these topics have been extremely useful for my understanding of the globalized popular culture in which the texts studied here are situated. Yet, he shares with Mignolo a certain omission (or at least a lack of prominence) of the role gender should play in any examination of border representations. This necessarily affects García Canclini's vision of Tijuana and by extension of the U.S.-Mexico border —as long as we agree to Tijuana's standing as the most notoriously emblematic urban center of *la frontera*. While García Canclini imagines Tijuana to be a premier site for the "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" strategies that he views as essential markers of "hybridity" (*Hybrid Cultures* 239-241), this mostly positive appreciation neglects to consider portrayals that are not necessarily "new" and empowered but more reactionary and marginalized, such as depictions of women that are objectified through their sexualization or that simply do not go beyond a secondary role in a text.[19]

This brief review of the scholarship would not be complete without acknowledging the influence of Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. Their collaboration in *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera* (2002) is an example of a gender-based analysis of border representations. Moreover, Castillo's contributions to the study of the portrayals of Mexican women and their multiple struggles with "the established order [that] prizes long-suffering motherhood as the only valid female virtue" (*Talking Back* 17) have long been valued in the field. As an undercurrent to my own analysis, I must admit that Castillo's "strategies" of covert subversion have certainly influenced the way in which this dissertation examines avenues

[19] We will engage this last point at some length in chapter 2 but for the moment the names of Luis Alberto Urrea and Luis Humberto Crosthwaite will serve as examples of writers who, at least in their early works, do not have women as protagonists.

for textual agency that may not be apparent at a first glance (*Talking Back* 36).[20] Of particular significance to my ideas about the public woman have been Castillo's thoughts about the "indecent," "easy" women of Mexican culture and their contestations —as well as their centrality— not only to the patriarchal order but to Mexican cultural identity (Castillo, *Easy Women* 3). Finally, in reference to the depictions of *las tijuanenses*, the close attention Castillo and Tabuenca's work paid to the *performativity* of sexuality in Rosina Conde's texts, informed my own endeavors to characterize Conde's protagonists and all manners of sexualized border women.

As for Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba, she is a prolific cultural studies scholar who has long analyzed the representations of border women from an "on-the-ground" perspective —one that often contests both the Mexican establishment and overly theoretical approaches from *el Norte* about *la frontera* (Vila, *Ethnography* 305).[21] Her recent work on filmic portrayals of the feminicides in Juárez calls our attention to the misogynistic images that surround the victims but, more importantly, it makes a case for the power of representations as she contends that with these depictions films (and by extension, other cultural texts) "support the hegemonic ideology that normalizes violence against women" (Tabuenca Córdoba, "Representations" 99). Furthermore, Tabuenca Córdoba's writings offer a gendered, Mexican, *fronteriza* point of view

---

[20] Of course Castillo refers to strategies deployed by Latin American women writers, not characters, in order to advance a feminist practice of textual analysis. However, I believe that some of the strategies used in her "tactical deployment," such as "misleading speech," "appropriation" and "negation" (of stereotypes) can be extended to my interpretation of how Mexican border women can be represented beyond passive, silent victims (Castillo, *Talking Back* 37, 40, 43, 54).

[21] Personally, I admire her courage for continuing to work for the border and from the border in these trying times for Juárez and for Mexico. Her generosity and guidance during my visit to the city in 2007 were truly invaluable for the development of this dissertation. Tabuenca Córdoba's CV can be found at: <http://aplicaciones.colef.mx/investigadores/CVU/cvu.aspx?idinv=14909#>

to border studies, a position that remains uncommon to date and even more so if one considers that she has studied both Juárez *and* Tijuana as prime examples and sources for border images. She has also contributed to bridging —as I hope my research will do, to an extent— the gap between the discourse that originates from Chican@ scholarship and from the Mexican research tradition.

It should be apparent by now due to this brief review of the pertinent scholars that the present analysis of the depictions of *las mexicanas de la frontera* is informed by theoretical concepts that come from diverse schools of thought but that share a *constructionist* approach to the question of representation. In other words, all of the theory that grounds this study assumes that the making of meaning in any specific socio-cultural context is created by a dynamic interplay of connections between the physical world, "the conceptual world" and "the signs, […] which 'stand for' or communicate these concepts" (Hall, "The Work" 61). Moreover, my own critical analysis is much influenced by the tenets of cultural consumption that support the idea that cultural texts are constructed in "an active, social practice of making meanings" (Storey 157). That is to say, a crucial pillar of this approach is the belief that these texts become sites of cultural struggle with respect to the meanings within them that reveal "particular competing social interests" (Storey 167). We can, therefore, identify the structures and the agents that affect the interaction between the cultural production and the consumption of these products in the figure of Mexican border women.

In order to better understand what I have alternatively been referring to as "representations," "portrayals," "depictions" and "images," it will be useful to refer to the concept of "identities" as recognized by Stuart Hall: "Identities are […] the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' […] that they are representations, that

representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the *Other*" (Hall, "Introduction" 6, emphasis mine). And while this quote hints at the ascendancy of the "imagined" over the "real," the implication that representations are construed through difference and/or exclusion, that is, by their relation to the Other is even more important to the present study (Hall, "Introduction" 4). This is so because such a definition of the process of representation hints at the relevance, which marginal subjects such as border women, may have in the construction of meanings in the specific context of *la frontera*.

Feminist scholarship, either applied to social studies or literary analysis, figures largely in this study of representations of women in the globalized scenario of the U.S.-Mexico border. Consequently, the terms "feminization" or "feminized" are likely to come to the fore. Kimberly A. Chang and and L.H.M. Ling's define the feminization of labor as follows,

> more women are working in certain sectors of the global economy. These are usually low-wage, low skilled, and low-mobility workers. At the same time, the global economy assigns to both women and men who work on its lower rungs' traits historically identified as "feminine," e.g. backwardness, irrationality, passivity, and victimhood (46-7).[22]

In the specific context of my work, the words "feminized" or "feminization" will be applied to a perceived abundance of women in situations where this appearance has altered the expectations of what a workforce or a migratory movement or a demographic "should" look like. Furthermore, while agreeing to Chang and Ling's view on the traditionally "feminine" characteristics of lower-tiered laborers, I will expand this portrayal beyond labor to include other border sites such as slums, the Mexican countryside and *la línea* itself. Finally, I also wish to

[22] For example, in the chapter devoted to the representations in Ciudad Juárez, the feminization of labor created by the *maquiladoras* is amply discussed with regards to the victimized and sexualized vision of women it has helped to generate.

imply that "feminization" alludes to the socioeconomic disadvantage that is usually associated with places where women are the main providers of labor.

No cultural representation of women can be properly examined without referring to the body —both real and imagined. Therefore, the theoretical concept of "sexualization" must be addressed. As stated previously, this term emphasizes that sexualized portrayals suggest not only the sexual availability of women but also their sexual subordination to men. Perhaps more importantly, sexualization implies objectification, understood as the antithetical notion to the constitution of a "subject." In this same vein, Luce Irigaray states that "the use, consumption and circulation of [women's] sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as 'subjects'" (84). Whether it be the women of Juárez, of Tijuana or migrants crossing the border, the mechanism of sexualization contributes heavily to their marginalized portrayals. And yet, Judith Butler's notion of performativity works as a more positive undercurrent to this textual analysis, particularly as it opens the "possibility of *subverting* and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power" (44, emphasis mine). For even if these representations may be objectifying and/or stereotypical with regards to gender roles, it is important to recognize that they are performative as well, and thus no more than "the illusion of an interior and organized gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler 173).

Almost as vital to the comprehension of the depictions of Mexican border women is the notion of stereotypes as asserted by Homi K. Bhabha. From abnegated mothers to firebrand, sexualized women to the vulnerable victims of globalization, stereotypes defined as "complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode(s) of representation" are easy to find in the border context

(Bhabha, *The location of culture* 70). The contradictions inherent in the construction of the stereotype are also extremely useful to the border theorization that this study intends, as (almost echoing Rolando Romero) a stereotype "is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence" (Bhabha, *The location of culture* 75). Yet, with all the difficulties that dealing with stereotypes entails, the concept as understood by Bhabha significantly contributes to its own *deconstruction* or, in Bhabha's words, "the stereotype is […] an 'impossible' object" (*The location of culture* 81). This can be explained through an additional definition of the term as a "discursive strategy" used by specific hegemonic powers in order to "fixate" the representation of the Other, a strategy that is bound to fail given the *ambivalent* nature of their own creation, which resists any "fixity" per se (Bhabha, *The location of culture* 66).[23] So, at least theoretically, stereotypes are bound to implode, an idea that is worth further consideration in the present analysis of border representations.

Prime amongst common stereotypes of Mexican women, even going beyond the border, is the portrayal of *the* Mexican mother. While not a theoretical term as such, since this depiction runs through almost all the images examined, its significance to my study cannot be overlooked. It is culturally closely related to the term "marianismo," which apparently was first discussed in academic literature by Evelyn P. Stevens, who defined it as "the cult of feminine spiritual superiority" (3). The symbolic relation between the Virgin Mary/Guadalupe and the ideal Mexican mother could be based on the idea that marianismo "engenders abnegation, that is, an infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice. No self-denial is too great for the [Mexican] woman

---

[23] Bhabha refers to "colonial discourse" as the originator of stereotype but I would be hesitant to characterize the powers that most contribute to U.S.-Mexico border representations in this way because strictly speaking, Mexico has never been a colony of the United States, even if it has often been subsumed under its imperialistic pretensions.

[and] she is also submissive to the demands of the men" (Stevens 9).[24] The additional component of asexuality of *la madre mexicana ideal* is essential to complete this stereotypical picture, which weighs heavily in the Mexican cultural imaginary and therefore, in the representations which will be analyzed here (Berg, Cinema 59).[25]

Finally, a theoretical concept that appears quite frequently in my dissertation is the rather elusive concept of "agency." Prevalent in postcolonial critiques and subaltern studies, this term, in its simplest form, refers to the capability of a subject to act with a certain measure of independence (Hai 15). Because it seems to be the best suited to the present discussion about border representations, I will turn to Bhabha's definition of "interstitial agency:"

> the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of *negotiation* where power is unequal but its *articulation* may be equivocal. Such negotiation [...] makes possible the emergence of an 'interstitial' agency that refuses the binary representation [...]. *Hybrid agencies* find their voice [and] deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to [...] give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy (Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" 58, emphases mine).

With the understanding that we are referring to texts and representations and not physical spaces or subjects,[26] diverse manifestations of this "interstitial" or "hybrid" (border?) agency will be explored as one of the main aims of this study, with close consideration of the possibility or impossibility of finding avenues for negotiation and/or articulations by Mexican border women.

---

[24] The rest of Stevens' essay though, has highly questionable assumptions, though, as it construes marianismo as a "female chauvinism" that Latin American women appear loath to renounce (15).

[25] The "monstrous double" of the virginal Mexican mother, the figure of La Malinche, will be amply discussed in chapter 3.

[26] I consider even women who appear in documentaries as "representations" since there is always a labor of portrayal and *performance* behind each one of their interventions on film.

It would seem that the textual *frontera*, with all its inherent ambivalence, could conceivably be a fertile ground for the development of this type of circumscribed agency for border women, even as competing cultural forces strive to make it otherwise.[27]

Having covered the main theoretical influences to the present analysis, I would like to clarify that this list of concepts is not just an inventory of individual critical terms functioning independently from each other. Their interconnectivity in this analysis is what effectively allows me to interrogate and entangle the web that produces the representations of Mexican border women. At this point, it becomes easier to explain the rationale behind the division of the chapters, as it goes from the most victimized and stereotyped portrayals of women in Ciudad Juárez (and at the same time the most paradoxical ones) to the ones who display the most interstitial agency through their performance not only of gender but of globalization —the women of Tijuana.[28] In the last two chapters, the mirror images of the women who migrate and of those who stay but are nevertheless affected by migration contend with issues of national identity, transculturation, feminization of poverty and issues of agency that emerge from the margins. All throughout, the depiction of *la frontera* as space of possibility struggles with its alter ego of the wild, uncivilized border, unquestionably shaping how the women of this border are portrayed.

Chapter 1 undertakes the representations of the women of Ciudad Juárez as they stand at the crossroads of feminicide, a phenomenon that has plagued the city since 1993 and has been

---

[27] I would not want to underplay the size of the forces that work against the emergence of agency in representations of Mexican border women but at the same time I feel compelled to highlight that within the struggles for agency lies the possibility of it actually appearing.

[28] By "performance of globalization," I mean to say that the *tijuanense* women portrayed here perform actions that forcibly reply to the effects of globalization in their lives: from the Marines who watch them perform on stage to the transnational companies that pollute their living environment, these women contend with globalization everyday as a central part of their lives.

defined as the murders of women specifically motivated by gender (Monárrez, "Feminicidio" 15). Feminicide is expressed concretely in two portrayals that are intrinsically intertwined: the figures of the victim and of the activist. There are several problems of interpretation that result from the core connection these depictions share, as it creates a paradoxical double bind brought on by the need of the activists to publicly *voice* a demand for justice while putting forward a private tragedy whose representation up to now has necessitated compliance with the same conditions of vulnerability and abuse that have *silenced* the victims in the first place. This means originally that victims and activists have been bound by a paradox of visibility/invisibility: activists can *only* appear as representatives for the voiceless, for the invisible, for the dead. Perhaps even more importantly, this chapter considers the conundrum of the "public woman": a conflictive depiction as the Mexican authorities have tried (successfully to a point) to brand the victims of feminicide —and by extension all other women associated with them— as "improperly public" in sexualized terms. These interpretative dilemmas will be examined through two basic texts: Alicia Gaspar de Alba's novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) and the documentary film *La Batalla de las Cruces* (2005), directed by Rafael Bonilla. These texts have been selected amongst a plethora of material surrounding the women of Juárez because they provide a somewhat atypical view to the problem as they each focus on different aspects of the sociocultural context that circumscribes the murders. Finally, I argue that as long as the representations of the women of Juárez cannot transcend that of the silent, "innocent" victim of globalization and misogyny and effectively *re-signify* the figure of the activist as a "public woman," the impunity that sustains feminicide will not end.

In chapter 2, the focus is on Tijuana, a city often characterized by its "tawdry reputation" that offers "tourism-as-escape" to foreigners, mainly U.S.-Americans (Arreola and Curtis 238).

Immersed in this representation, the figure of the prostitute and other manners of "public women" looms large over the depictions of *las tijuanenses*. From two very different feminist approaches, the portrayals of the women of Tijuana reinterpret and re-create the notion of the public woman with all of its paradoxical negotiations. In particular, the examination of the chosen texts will consider how these "public women" go beyond their textual sexualization or victimization in order to speak and be seen in *public* contexts, daring to oppose the stigma associated with these subversive acts even if they cannot claim full economic or gendered empowerment. Tijuana-native Rosina Conde places the gendered performativity of her female characters at the center of the three short stories that have been selected for this chapter: "Viñetas Revolucionarias," "Señora Nina" (in *En la Tarima*, 2001) and "¿Estudias o Trabajas?" (in *Arrieras Somos*, 1994). On their part, directors Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre open spaces for self-representation for the *maquila*-workers-turned-activists who feature in their documentary *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (2006). By doing so, these women *perform* their responses to globalization on film, balancing their public and their private personas in an alternate route to patriarchal expectations of their characterizations as mothers. This study argues that the representations put forth by these texts could signal the way to a more positive border imagery for women, precisely because they respond to and not avoid the more stereotypically negative connotations of exploitation and sexualization that have been prevalent for *mexicanas de la frontera*.

Chapter 3 shifts the analysis from the visibility of "public women" to portrayals denoted by invisibility: undocumented Mexican women migrants in the United States. The archetypal figure of La Malinche will be used as an explicative model in the study of these portrayals in three quite different texts: the feature films *Bread and Roses* (2000) and *La Misma Luna* (2007)

and the compilation of testimonies *La migra me hizo los mandados [The Border Patrol Ate my Dust]* (2002). La Malinche, an iconic figure in Mexican folklore, interacts with the female protagonists of these texts as they are placed in risk of being associated connotatively with the "treachery" of preferring a different culture over their nation (Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche* 153). And while La Malinche is not a theoretical construct per se, since I am using her as a central metaphor in this chapter, it would be appropriate to further elucidate on her multiple meanings. Arguably the best-known characterization of Malintzin or La Malinche, as well as one of the most negative ones, was constructed by Octavio Paz in the classic book of essays about Mexicanness *El Laberinto de la Soledad* [*The Labyrinth of Solitude*] (1964), where he portrayed La Malinche, the translator of Hernán Cortés, as *la Chingada* ["the fucked one"], a foundational mother of Mexicans and a traitor to her own children by virtue of her allegiance to the conqueror (72). Since then, the weight of Paz's depiction in the Mexican imaginary has been enormous, particularly as it problematically intersects with the issues of gender and race. Key in Paz's representation has been the construction of Malintzin and Cortés as lovers, even if the exact nature of their relationship (Malintzin was first presented to Cortés as a slave) is historically unclear. In any case, according to Paz, La Malinche is still commonly made out to symbolize Mexican women who are "fascinadas, violadas o seducidas" ["fascinated, raped or seduced"] by a foreign white man (72). More recent interpretations of Malinche's story, originating in Chicana feminist scholarship, instead emphasize her role as a cultural translator and recast her in a more positive light as she, "who served as a link for two cultures, becoming the mother of the new race of mestizos" (Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche* 151).[29] In the three texts that will be discussed in

[29] With respect to the associations of La Malinche to Mexican motherhood, Sandra Messinger Cypess has also commented that in Mexico, "women in their specialized role as mother figures

this chapter, different manifestations of La Malinche will help construe the depictions of Mexican migrant women from vital cultural and gendered perspectives as they either re-appropriate, reject or obviate this icon in favor of new self-representations that —paradoxically, like La Malinche— *speak* in different tongues.

The other side of migration is stasis or permanence. The portrayals of Mexican women who stay in their hometowns while their loved ones migrate to the United States will be analyzed in chapter 4, the final chapter of this dissertation, through the play *Mujer on the border* (2005), adapted by María Muro and Marta Aura, and the documentary film *Letters from the Other Side* (2006), directed by Heather Courtney. In the Mexican heartland, the representations of the women who did not leave become cultural battlegrounds as nationalistic and patriarchal discourses confront feminist discussions that view the absence of men as an opportunity for the emergence of more equal gender roles. This confrontation is reflected in both of the chosen texts as the female protagonists present responses to their roles as mothers and often as heads of family within the globalized context that has been forced upon the Mexican countryside.

In *Mujer on the Border*, the main character, Aurora, addresses the larger issues caused by this feminization of rural lands through her embodiment of a "gendered ambivalence" to traditional expectations of women under patriarchy. This term implies that Aurora both complies to *and* defies the expected standard of an abnegated mother yearning for her son, as she suffers although not passively, personifying at the same time a dramatic denunciation and a social critique of the personal consequences of migration. As for the women of *Letters from the Other Side*, they surpass the assumption of victimization given by their "abandonment" and they gradually obtain what we will term a "realistic agency" or an agency from the margins, one

---

have dominated the myths of nationality and cultural identity" and amid them, the figure of La Malinche has been elevated to foundational status ("'Mother' Malinche"15).

shown from the partial viewpoint of the filmmaker as an empowerment with limitations, both to their gendered and their socioeconomic independence. Simultaneously, it is quite notable that these women, as interviewed on camera, present a comprehensive understanding of the bigger picture that has created and maintained the existing circumstances of their domestic situation vis-à-vis the migration of their family members. In sum, in this final chapter I will explore how the concurrent positions of opposition and acquiescence to gendered traditions engage in a dialectics of representation in the figures of the women who stayed behind.

The imaginary created by the U.S.-Mexico border is a construct that while attached to a physical space, in a specific socio-historic timeframe, has the uncanny ability to bring the center to the margin and vice versa. Conjugating the axes of gender and sexuality, national identity and globalization, the figures of Mexican border women paradoxically contribute to both erasing and reifying the walls of stereotype and subversion. This study hopes to play a role in the bridging and crossing of the textual *frontera* by participating in the bilingual, interstitial and multifocal conversations that this *encrucijada* of representation generates.

Chapter 1. *Mujer constante más allá de la muerte* or, (The) overpowering constructions of feminicide in Ciudad Juárez.[30]

Almost 20 years after the first gender-related murders or feminicides were detected in Ciudad Juárez in 1993, it is still hard to believe that these atrocious crimes are mostly unsolved.[31] To date, more than 500 feminicides have taken place in this border city and the fact that many of the women's bodies found were dumped in the desert, exhibiting signs of sexual assault and torture, is a significant factor in the climate of horror surrounding these cases.[32] On the other hand, the unsolved status of these murders has motivated a proliferation of local and international outrage directed towards the Mexican state and the government of Chihuahua for their inability or unwillingness to stop these crimes.[33]

While this appalling situation could easily account for the ubiquitous representation of death in the constructions of *juarense* women in a variety of media, there are notable differences to be observed in the two main embodiments of feminicide: the victim and the activist. This chapter will discuss the interpretative problems that arise from these cultural representations

---

[30] "Invariable Woman Beyond Death": a wordplay on Francisco de Quevedo's "Amor constante más allá de la muerte" (Invariable Love Beyond Death).

[31] The expression feminicide, which refers to murders of women specifically motivated by gender (Monárrez, "Feminicidio" 15), appears alternatively as 'feminicide' and 'femicides'. I have chosen to use the former throughout this text, partly because "feminicide" has also been linked with the term genocide (Schmidt Camacho, "Ciudadana X" 275).

[32] In 2003, Amnesty International published a report titled "Intolerable Killings —Mexico: 10 Years of Abductions and Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua," where the exact number of murdered women was placed at 370, and of these, at least 137 exhibited signs of sexual violence. More recent data, from the National Commission for Human Rights (*Criterios*), increases these figures by 79 more murders from January 2004 to July 2007.

[33] The most notable example of international mobilization on this issue happened when V-Day 2004 was dedicated to the Murdered and Missing Women of Juárez. The money raised was donated to local support groups. Source: http://www.vday.org/contents/vcampaigns/spotlight/juarez

themselves. Particularly, I center on the paradoxes that emerge either from highlighting a condition of helplessness and victimization or from imagining a different public persona for the activists who campaign against feminicide.

In order to explore these key portrayals, I have selected two texts that emphasize the interplay between different interpretations of the Juárez feminicides phenomenon that have originated from both Mexico and the United States. Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005), is significant to this study not only because it is actually one of the few single full length novels centering *exclusively* on the feminicides, but because it provides a representative and yet slightly uncharacteristic perspective on the representation of the murdered women.[34] That is to say, *Desert Blood*, while still depicting *juarense* women as inescapably victimized, considers this portrayal from a more detached, external context, and thus manages to offer a distinctive viewpoint. In order to delve into the representation of the activist, and as a contrast to the written media, I chose one of the many documentaries on the situation in Juárez: *La Batalla de las Cruces* (2005). This Mexican film presents a valuable counterpoint to other better-known documentaries firstly because it focuses more on the activists than on the victims of feminicide, and secondly because it originates in an academic setting (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social —CIESAS).[35] On the other hand, *La Batalla de las Cruces* complements the majority of these documentaries as it aims to highlight a feminine —and feminist— discourse in response to impunity.

---

[34] The novel will be referred to only as *Desert Blood* for the remainder of the text. It is noteworthy that while non-fcition on the Juárez feminicides abounds, there are not too many novels on this topic. One of the latest ones is Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez* (2008).
[35] Center for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology.

Within the realm of the specific and contextualized border imaginary of Ciudad Juárez, one would expect a multiplicity of narratives that corresponded to the diverse life stories of the women who have been involved in this tragedy in one way or another. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, only two distinct representations stand out in the wide range of literary, filmic and popular culture texts inspired by these terrible events.[36] Furthermore, these two portrayals are intrinsically enmeshed in each other, as the murdered women become the *raison d'être* of the female activists and the protesters become the voice of the dead. While this melding of images may conjure up a visual of women being dragged into a vortex of unresolved trauma, it should be clear that no analysis of the Juárez feminicides could ever be that simple.

To begin with, any interpretation must consider the specific socio-historic context of this border city, an already conflictive site where the vectors of globalization, political and economic power of Mexico and the United States, class division, illegality, and patriarchal mores on female sexuality, have often clashed. Simultaneously, from a more abstract position, I propose the dual concepts of visibility/invisibility and voice/silence as theoretical parameters to guide the analysis of the current representations of women in Juárez. For, if in a post-NAFTA era the figure of the *juarense* woman has been repeatedly made invisible on account of her socio-economic marginality and her inferior status within a patriarchal society, it is also regrettably true that in the age of feminicide she only becomes visible when she is being sexualized or killed. Here is where her representations turn paradoxical.

Firstly, there is the contradiction that arises from the apparent impossibility of transcending the portrayal of *the victim.* On the one hand, there exists an undeniable urgency to

[36] In the website of the NGO Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa / May Our Daughters Return Home, there is an extensive selection of over 50 documents related to the feminicides, such as books, poems, songs, movies, plays and documentaries.

uphold this portrayal because of the vast pain inflicted in the *juarense* society by the feminicides and the overall absence of justice regarding these cases. Nevertheless, when the majority of the representations emphasize the image of women-as-victims, they become forever entrapped as disempowered, voiceless, violated Others. As for their families and the activists that demand justice, their paradox is similar: they are likewise and problematically bound to their representation *exclusively* as mediums for the victims. Now, when the patriarchal and misogynist Mexican authorities insist on sexualizing all women connected with the feminicides by means of depicting them as "outsiders," "uncontrolled," and "improperly public," the third and most important paradox appears.[37] It resides in the dilemma of how the images of these women can be (re)appropriated without falling into the trap of assuming traditionally expected feminine positions of "innocence" and silence. As a response to these conceptualizations, I intend to illustrate and elucidate, by means of the chosen texts, how representative and alternative cultural constructions interact with these paradoxical portrayals of the women of Juárez.

Ciudad Juárez has had its image tangled up with the social construction of its female inhabitants: from its "sin city" Prohibition-era avatar to the more current one of *maquiladora* Mecca. Therefore, it is not surprising that Juárez's Kafkaesque transformation from *la mejor frontera de México* to the most demonized border city, corresponded with the metamorphosis of its women from a purportedly vibrant female workforce to dismembered female bodies discarded in the desert.[38] In this historic crossroads where the *juarense* women seem on the verge of

[37] For a complete account of the authorities' insulting discourse, see: Tabuenca Córdoba, María Socorro. *"Baile de Fantasmas* en Ciudad Juárez al Final/Principio del Milenio." *Más Allá de la Ciudad Letrada: Crónicas y Espacios Urbanos.* Eds. Boris Muñoz y Silvia Spitta. Pittsburg, PA: Universidad de Pittsburg, 2003.

[38] This slogan was started by the local government to promote Juárez in 1984 as Mexico entered NAFTA.

becoming the epitome of subalternity, it is more crucial than ever to explore cultural representations that contextualize how this portrayal came to be and acknowledge incipient spaces for women's agency even within the overshadowing constructions of feminicide.

1.1 *Desert Blood*, or *Pobre Juárez…Tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de sus víctimas.*[39]

> "Next shot: the girl lying face up in the sand, hair chopped off, still wearing her uniform, arms tucked under the body, one leg bent so sharply the heel was touching the hip" (Gaspar de Alba 281).

Before the ghastly images of the victims of feminicide began to dominate the cultural landscape concerning Ciudad Juárez, the literary representations of border women included the exploration of female bodies as central loci for self-discovery, and not emblems of death.[40] These illustrations from pre-feminicide times now contrast with an ever-degenerating climate of violence in Mexico that has effectively overshadowed the specter of feminicide in the national imaginary.[41] In the midst of this sobering scenario, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's second novel, *Desert Blood*, summarizes all the larger issues surrounding the Juárez feminicides. My analysis of the representations of *juarense* women in this novel will thus reflect how these depictions are inextricably linked to more general social concerns originating from this border region. In other words, I will examine the problematic construction of *juarense* women mainly as *victims* through its interaction with globalization as a relatively recent social, economic, political and cultural force in the area. Furthermore, I will explore the effects of feminicide in relation to the gendered victimization fostered by the murders and echoed by cultural representations such as *Desert*

---

[39] Poor Juárez…So Far Away from God, So Close to its Victims. The original saying is alluded to in *Desert Blood:* "Pobre México, Tan Lejos de Dios, Tan Cerca de EEUU" ["Poor México, So Far Away from God, So Close to the United States."] It is attributed to Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915).

[40] The short story compilation, *Callejón Sucre y Otros Relatos* (1994), by *juarense* author Rosario Sanmiguel, is a good example of pre-feminicide representations of women.

[41] Any given day, the reader of www.jornada.unam.mx will find a story on the wave of violence that has been unleashed on the Mexican society by the scourges of organized crime and a corrupt police force.

Blood: a victimization that extends beyond patriarchal subjugation and sexualization of women, to a silencing of their voices, a rejection of their worth and their erasure of self.[42]

First, it is important to situate *Desert Blood* within the context of the extensive literature inspired by the feminicides. Here, it is worth mentioning that *Desert Blood* could be placed in the middle of a continuum that begins with works that offer more of a universal commentary on evil and ends with the more local focus of *juarense* writings. At the former end of the spectrum, *2666* (2004) by Roberto Bolaño can be found as the leading example of a general exploration on the mechanics of horror and violence. On the latter end, the local plays, short stories, novels and testimonial accounts that center on this subject concentrate their gaze on the particular social dynamics that spawn and sustain the feminicide from the Mexican side.[43] In other words, the *juarense* texts may comment adequately on the participation of local killers/rapists/gangbangers, forensic investigators, police, victims' family members and state attorneys in this tragedy, but their viewpoint is too localized to be able to remark on other larger social issues or forces that may be involved.[44] In comparison with these two extremes, Gaspar de Alba's novel, on the whole, has more of an international perspective with regards to how the impunity of these crimes came to be.

---

[42] By sexualization I mean that women are represented with a primary emphasis on their supposed sexual availability *and* their sexual subordination to men, which inherently objectifies them. In the case of Juárez, I believe that the sexualization of women certainly contributes to their objectification and the denial of their status as subjects.

[43] It is worth noting that the larger variety of the textual representations of feminicide has originated in the Mexican side, and even most texts from the United States are produced by Mexican-Americans. This may attest to the interest of a cultural community in these murders, despite differences in nationality.

[44] Instead, their blame is set squarely on a misogynistic society, which ultimately does not answer the question of why the feminicides are taking place precisely around Juárez and not rampantly in other Mexican urban areas. As for the characterization of the murdered women, though, it is quite telling that the *juarense* texts share with *Desert Blood* a representation that depicts them as continuously victimized bodies, trapped in a never-ending cycle of death.

That is to say, *Desert Blood* advances explanations to the phenomenon of feminicide that connect it quite directly to globalization while at the same time situating it within the context of Juárez. But in order to comprehend how the novel finds a variety of social actors guilty for their involvement in the murder of *juarense* women within the framework of *globalization*, it would be appropriate to advance a definition of this term. Thus, understanding globalization in a general sense as a series of processes of reciprocal economic and cultural dependence that "*reorder* differences and inequalities without suppressing them" (García Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada* 49, emphasis mine), has at least one serious benefit. Namely, this concept of globalization places an accent on the rearrangement of socioeconomic disparities that necessarily disturbs an existing equilibrium, one that was already unfair for women in Juárez in terms of patriarchal repression. Therefore, feminicide can be comprehended as an indirect consequence of globalization, since the appearance of global interdependence in this border scenario creates new imbalances that affect women in particular in several fronts. On this note, *Desert Blood* specifically takes into account not only the *maquiladora* exploitation of women workers fostered by globalization but also its contribution to a climate of border violence and broad socioeconomic marginalization that acutely infringe on women's human rights.

The global considerations of the novel are not surprising given the author's self-professed borderlands origin and positioning as a *fronteriza* voice who specifically seeks "to expose the horrors of this deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the English-speaking public" (Gaspar de Alba vi).[45] And yet, despite these meritorious intentions, one must consider the distinct and possibly conflicting viewpoint from which *Desert Blood* depicts the women of Juárez. Indeed,

---

[45] Alicia Gaspar de Alba's standpoint arguably stems from her Mexican-American heritage but also from the academic background that informs her work, as she has been a professor of English and Chicana and Chicano studies at UCLA since 1994. Thus, much of the subtext in the novel is heavily influenced by academic feminism and globalization studies.

the novel cannot escape the victimhood paradox, as the *juarense* women are consistently —and even somewhat stereotypically— represented as all-around casualties: of globalization because of their socioeconomic disempowerment and of patriarchy due to their submissiveness.

The plot of the novel hints at all of these underlying issues from the very beginning. For starters, the Chicana point of view (a reflection of the author's) is personified in the protagonist Ivon Villa. A lesbian ABD in Women's Studies, Ivon returns to her native El Paso to adopt a Mexican baby from Cecilia, a *maquiladora* worker in Juárez. When she gets there, she discovers that the pregnant girl has been brutally killed and her body found in the desert. At this point, Ivon's cousin Ximena —a social worker in El Paso/Juárez— convinces the reluctant mother-to-be to consider adopting another child. This introduces the reader to a second Mexican mother, Elsa, who is portrayed in a pitiful state, as she is dying of cancer and therefore looking to give up her three-year old son for adoption. To make matters worse, the reader finds out that Elsa was probably artificially inseminated in a *maquiladora* by one of the supposed feminicide killers, who allegedly used her body for medical experiments that may have caused her to develop the disease.[46] Now, as Ivon starts getting more involved with the crimes, her younger sister Irene disappears in Juárez and Ivon starts a frenetic search of her own to find her before she becomes the next victim. She finally manages to rescue her sister from the snuff ring that was holding her, with the help of a police detective from El Paso. The novel ends on a happy note with a family scene in Irene's hospital room that includes the little Mexican boy, soon to be adopted by Ivon and her partner Brigit.

---

[46] The real life name of the man alluded here was Abdul Latif Sharif, a chief suspect in the murders of Juárez, and who died in prison in Chihuahua in 2006. He was never suspected of running experiments with women but the authorities contended that he was the intellectual author of countless murders, even while being behind bars. Elsa's unwanted pregnancy in the novel works as a clear metaphor of rape.

The apparently simple plot of the novel camouflages to an extent the deeper links of the feminicides to globalization and to the victimization of *juarense* women that *Desert Blood* means to address. Thus, the opening pages of the novel, the gory description of a pregnant woman being murdered and disemboweled in the desert, offer important clues as to what we might expect further in the story with respect to the representation of *juarense* women: “The rope tightened around her neck, and she felt her belly drag over sand and rocks, the wound in her breast pricked by sagebrush” (Gaspar de Alba 1). And while this is not the only feminicide described in the novel, its location at the beginning of *Desert Blood* is crucial, as it firmly positions the women of Juárez as helpless *victims* of horrendous crimes.[47] This murder scene, in fact, makes a point of emphasizing the vulnerability of Cecilia, who is drugged by her attackers so as to keep her conscious while she is being stabbed.

The extreme cruelty inflicted on the bodies of the feminicide victims, as narrated in *Desert Blood*, has the effect of reducing all other characterizations of *juarense* women in the novel to the personification of powerlessness. Hence, a closer look at the nature of the victimization process seems necessary at this point. On this matter, René Girard has theorized that societies are, by essence, always on the verge of imploding due to internal violence, which must be appeased by finding “a surrogate victim […] chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand” (2). In Gaspar de Alba’s novel, there are merely three characters that actually become victims of feminicide but they are clearly meant to substitute symbolically for other women, to take their sacrificial place in what is constructed as a society misogynistic to the extreme. As for the actual selection of the victims, it is quite remarkable that the three women

[47] In fact, activists take great pains in calling attention to the euphemism implied in the popular term “Las Muertas de Juárez,” which obscure the fact that these women did not simply die, but they were brutally murdered.

who are killed in the novel appear to conform to the requirement that in order "to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community (sic) to choose victims outside itself" (Girard 8). The fact that the chosen victims —Cecilia, Mireya, another *maquiladora* worker, and an unnamed little girl who is murdered as part of a snuff tape— all seem to share a working class background supports the idea that this is the condition that marks them as victims, further highlighting the state of marginality that erases them.[48]

On the topic of victimization, it must be noted that one of the most significant aspects of *Desert Blood* is that its textual representation of *juarense* women furthers a necessary reflection on the intricate —and problematic— symbolism attached to the figure of the victim, that is, the idea of her helplessness and her disempowerment. This characterization of *las mujeres de* Juárez mostly as victims is particularly challenging because it runs the risk of "collapsing these women in a vacuum of sameness," or turning them into speechless subalterns (Rojas, "The 'V-Day' March" 223). And while the novel does this to a point —mainly with respect to its depiction of working class Mexican women as stereotypically meek— it could also be argued that *Desert Blood* manages to transcend that victimized representation precisely because of its stated pursuit of greater awareness of the feminicides. Besides, Gaspar de Alba's text does allow for other women, such as Ivon and Irene, to possess a degree of agency, debunking the idea that *all* women are victims necessarily. Finally, the novel considers portrayals of the murdered women

[48] This is the extent of my agreement with Girard's theories about victimization, as the continuation of the phenomenon of feminicide attests to the fact that unlike the postulates of *Violence and the Sacred* (1979), there is neither a sacralization of the murdered women or an apparent restoration of the social order stemming from these deaths.

that are not necessarily *centered* on their sexual modesty, thus differentiating its representations of the victims of feminicide from those of most *juarense* activists.[49]

Now, within the textual space of *Desert Blood*, the victimization of the women of Juárez can be characterized by four major points: first, there is the stress on their helplessness, which can be best exemplified by the novel's portrayal of a failed motherhood. Secondly, their silencing is significantly connected to processes that ultimately alienate them as citizens. Thirdly, there is a distinct critique made by including the representation of *juarense* women as worthless human waste —a depiction easily linked to the prevalent figure of the cadaver in the novel. Finally, *Desert Blood* highlights the victimization of these women in connection to their gendered sexualization, especially as it is associated with their work at the *maquiladoras*.

With respect to this first aspect of the characterization of *las mujeres de Juárez* as helpless victims throughout the novel, it is quite significant to explore how the idea of their vulnerability becomes inextricably linked to their failure at the basic, traditional, feminine role of motherhood. An initial explanation of this connection, from the perspective of Gaspar de Alba's work, would argue that these Mexican women are not able to be effective as mothers not by any fault of their own but because of the environment of poverty that surrounds them. In other words, the *juarense* mothers that the novel focuses on are regarded as ineffective mostly because they are helpless to alleviate their indigence, considering that the slum where they live "was no place to bring up a child […] but it wasn't Elsa's fault, or the grandmother's, either. They were doing

---

[49] As briefly aforementioned, the sexualized representation of *juarense* women has been repeatedly countered by most local activist organizations with a problematic opposite: the figure of the *innocent*, virginal young woman. This image holds conflictive connotations due to its inherent adhesion to a patriarchal double standard concerning female sexuality and women's moral "worth." This paradoxical portrayal will be discussed at length in the analysis of *La Batalla de las Cruces*, as it concerns more directly the depiction of female activists when they access public spaces and claim a voice for the murdered women.

what they could to survive their poverty and Elsa's illness" (Gaspar de Alba 89). This lack of agency becomes all the more problematic when the only solution offered by the novel is the intervention of the women from *el Norte*.

Thus, when compared to Ivon and her wife Brigit —the ultimate "good mothers" who will truly be able to care for poor Mexican children— it seems obvious that their Mexican counterparts are woefully deficient in their material resources. And yet, there are other important failures implied in this comparison. For, in a country such as Mexico, where maternity is held in the highest of regards, this lack of success in the traditional gender role *par excellence* is considered a serious matter. Therefore if, as implied in the text, "Women are always giving up babies in Juárez" (Gaspar de Alba 20), the *juarense* mothers have plenty to worry about with respect to their status in their own society, particularly if this perceived fiasco at being good mothers earns them the adjectives of "inadequate," "failed" Mexican women.

Considering how the characterization of *juarense* women as unsuccessful mothers can be so problematic within the local context, it is additionally distressing to note the paradoxical bind to traditional patriarchal values that these Mexican mothers are shown to have in *Desert Blood*. Hence, at the same time that a conservative perspective chastises women who cannot be acceptable mothers for their children, these same women uphold the exact belief system that deems them unfit. A prime example of this conventional outlook can be found in the Mexican characters' expected reaction to Ivon's homosexuality. Thus, the protagonist is warned by her cousin not to "go saying you are a dyke, or they'll never agree to let you adopt the baby" (Gaspar de Alba 36). In the novel, the explanation to this alleged prejudice is relatively stereotypical: these poor Mexican families appear to be controlled by their religion, which only reinforces their traditional point of view and their wariness of "foreign" lifestyles. Furthermore, these misgivings

serve the textual purpose of pitting Ivon as a heroine against a traditionalist, narrow-minded society, which can only conceive of women as following strict standards with respect to their sexuality and expected gender roles.

As a final point on this discussion on motherhood in *Desert Blood*, it must be noted that both Cecilia and Elsa, the two Mexican mothers who are featured most prominently in the plot of the novel, are ultimately denoted by the exploitation of their reproductive abilities. This is mostly inscribed in their characterizations as women who will give up their children to the liberal *Americanas.* And yet, while the image of Third World babies being rescued from squalor by a U.S.-American heroine —even if lesbian and Chicana— might seem distasteful to some, the novel manages to hold its moral compass. It does so by emphasizing that this condition of neglect and wretchedness that corners women and children is a representation that Mexican mothers seem helpless to overcome.

Expanding on this idea of vulnerability in association with economic disempowerment, it must be noted that it is precisely this metaphorical lumping of all the women of Juárez into a specific marginal class that works as one of the prime ways in which they are characterized as victims in *Desert Blood*. The silencing of their voices logically follows this stratification, as they are deemed within the space constructed by the novel as not worthy to be heard. Moreover, even the space of their silence becomes occupied, as the descriptions of their dead bodies underpin the idea that "Sobre todo en Ciudad Juárez […] el cuerpo femenino es un objeto de uso, de consumo, una superficie inscribible" ['Especially in Ciudad Juárez […] the female body is an object of use, of consumption, an inscribable surface'] (Melgar y Belausteguigoitia 10). In the novel, then, there is a particular emphasis on the gruesome "messages" that the assassins leave behind on the dead victims, such as the "worthless pennies" that are stuffed into them, or the satanic markings

on their breasts (Gaspar de Alba 249-251). With this savage appropriation of the murdered women's bodies and voices beyond death, the idea of the expendability of their lives is repeatedly underscored.

This image of the disposable, silenced *juarense* woman is well embedded into the socio-cultural context depicted in *Desert Blood*. In it, these marginalized populations become stripped of the most basic rights of a national citizen (Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!" 111). This is possible because the working class women who become the victims of feminicide in the novel, as well as their families, are no match against an environment of misogynistic violence propped up by the highest levels of power in the region. Now, more specifically, *Desert Blood* points to U.S. Border Patrol agents, Mexican *judiciales*, vicious cartel drug lords, government officials, and *maquiladora* owners as alleged responsible parties for the women's murders. And while the actual perpetrators in this whodunit turn out to be a gang that produces snuff films, it is important to note that all of the aforementioned actors —with some of them in fact belonging to the snuff ring— are fundamentally implicated in the globalized setting that allows for the Juárez murders to continue being ignored and routinely dismissed by the Mexican authorities.

Ultimately, the issue of assigning blame for the murders of women in Juárez is much more complex than pointing fingers at specific nations, industries, socioeconomic processes or gendered social structures, regardless of how hegemonic they may seem. This is so because the situation in the U.S.-Mexico border appears to be increasingly approaching what has been termed a *necropolitical* social order, where "multiple forces and processes, including militarization, denationalization, neoliberalism, and ingovernability" cohabitate (Fregoso "We Want Them Alive!" 109). In *Desert Blood*, these larger powers that compose Fregoso's necropolitical power appear associated with the silencing of women in a direct way:

> A huge malignant tumor of silence, meant to protect not the perpetrators, themselves, but the profit reaped by the handiwork of the perpetrators [:] from the actual agents of the crime to the law enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements (Gaspar de Alba 335).

The use of the term "agents" must be particularly emphasized here, as it stands in stark contrast with the lack of voice, and therefore *agency*, which the victims of feminicide suffer from. And yet, from the perspective of *Desert Blood,* it would appear that the abetting of the murders of the *juarense* women by the highest authorities in the region goes hand in hand with the representation of these women as *silenced* victims devoid of human rights. For as long as they are "construidas simbólicamente, local, nacional e internacionalmente en un vacío de 'las muertas de Juárez,'" ['symbolically construed, locally, nationally and internationally in a vacuum of "'the dead women of Juárez,'"] without any access to the basic rights of citizenship (Rojas, "Reinventando" 102), their pleas for justice will continue to be ignored. In the novel, the most extreme form of this representational alienation from their rights as citizens and as human beings will be undoubtedly manifested in the figure of the cadaver, as can be observed in the following excerpt from a scene depicting the autopsy of a murdered woman, which the protagonist attends. "Her head was turned sideways, facing Ivon, the eyes a milky red, the mouth wide open. The body was marbled green and yellow, the skin loose, the hands curled inward, toes pointed. Dark rope burns on her neck. […] Ivon counted seventeen black gashes" (Gaspar de Alba 50).

The aesthetics of murder used in this description completes the dehumanization of the character of Cecilia, in a fashion eerily reminiscent of Mexican *nota roja* newspapers or even

their more polished TV avatars, such as the X-Files or CSI.[50] In the palette of the autopsy scene, the abnormal colors complete the impression that this is no longer a woman, not human anymore. In many ways, the following words of Cathy Fourez are echoed in Gaspar de Alba's depiction: "La identidad única de la víctima se desagrega en su cadáver, […] pero también en lo abyecto" ['The unique identity of the victim is disaggregated in its cadaver, […] but also in that which is abject" (81). Thus, the alienation of the person is completed with the uncanny degradation of her body. Moreover, the hyperbolic elements of murder —such as the evidence of strangling and repeated stabbing— underscore the brutality of the attack, which in its inconceivable violence further prevents the reader from considering that this could have been done to a breathing human being. All of this, though, makes for a bizarrely seductive element of morbid titillation in the portrayal of a murdered body —which may explain the popularity of these textual and visual representations. In the case of *Desert Blood,* then, it would follow that its choice of format was based on a conceptualization of the murder mystery as a well-liked genre, in the hopes that this would increase its expected audience. However, by keeping to this genre, the text necessarily diminished its complexity vis-à-vis its character development, with the result of Mexican women mostly appearing as, by and large, stereotyped victims.

Nevertheless, more than a victimized typecasting of *juarense* women, arguably the most important dilemma arising from the focus on the murdered bodies in *Desert Blood* is that it reiterates a particular discourse that, according to Alicia Schmidt Camacho, problematically represents these women as human waste ("Body Counts" 24). This depiction thus unintentionally mimics the underlying assumption behind the ineptitude of the authorities in solving these

[50] *Nota roja* newspapers commonly display gory photographs and crime scene stories in the most scandalous ways possible. [The common translation of yellow press is not completely accurate here, as *nota roja* is only devoted to covering bloody deaths, of common folk.]

crimes: that the murdered women are of no significance to society. It therefore becomes relatively easy to establish symbolic links between the descriptions of these women's dead bodies and their characterization as helpless, voiceless and marginalized: without any real "value" for anyone except for Others as subaltern as them. The fixation on the image of the cadaver in the novel acquires a particularly disturbing additional connotation since the tortured bodies are confirmed as "objects" of no importance precisely due to the fact that both Cecilia and Mireya are found discarded in the desert, as if they were refuse. They are thus doubly robbed of their humanity: in their atrocious murders and in the way they are deemed worthless by the continued desecration of their bodies in death.

The last facet of the characterization of *juarense* women as victims in *Desert Blood* adds a crucial subtext to the portrayal of feminicide by delving into the intersections of a long-standing sexualization of women in borderland settings and the incursion of relatively recent socio-cultural representations involving the *maquiladoras.* The first association implies that women are being killed in Juárez because of their sexualized representations, which, in the novel, are even advertised in the internet: "*You will not find a place with more beautiful, available, hot-blooded young ladies*" (Gaspar de Alba 117). Hence, there is a textual creation of the urban space, especially the bars, as a place of moral —and literal— danger for women, since they become linked to the supposedly dispensable and despised figure of the prostitute. Within *Desert Blood*, this risky association in women's portrayals is explained as motivated by patriarchal attempts at controlling female sexuality. As Ivon ponders "No wonder these crimes haven't been solved [...]. From the prostitutes to the police, everyone thinks it's just about sex, it's just about the girls going off with men, *por allí*" (Gaspar de Alba 186). But again, this passage can be seen to reproduce misogynist cultural perceptions via the moral degradation

implicit in this sexualized portrayal. In this way, the figure of the *victim* as the predominant representation of the women of Juárez is underlined: a victim to be blamed, with no value, with no rights —including the right to an unpunished sexuality.

The representation of the sexualized victim, deprived of her human rights, becomes even more paradoxical when it is associated with what should have been perceived as economic empowerment: the work of women in the *maquiladoras* of Juárez. On this note, Gay Young has observed that women's work in the *maquiladoras* both *contested* and *strengthened* patriarchal controls (106 emphasis mine), meaning that ornamental, subservient and stigmatized femininities often clashed with 'modern' work ethics (109).[51] For women's employment in these industries, far from being symbolized positively in this border context, appears to constitute a challenge to patriarchy by virtue of her labor, thus begetting "moral" attacks on the image of *maquiladora* workers. These attacks can be readily explained as the women's work denotes a direct confrontation to a patriarchal ideal of domesticity and economic dependence for women. An example of this vilification of working women in *Desert Blood* can be noticed in the figure of the "maqui-loca" Barbie dolls sold all over the city, which showcase the supposedly popular depiction of these workers as whores. In fact, the definition of this term that the novel provides is that "maqui-loca" is "the vernacular way of referring to *maquiladora* workers who become Americanized and turn into whores" (Gaspar de Alba 211). Now, the consideration of what exactly is meant by "Americanized" is a challenging issue to be pondered in this text, as it touches on the difficulties that patriarchy has in "controlling" working women, as well as on

[51] One example of the paradoxical treatment of women in the *maquiladora* labor force are the widespread "Señorita Maquiladora" contests, with the obvious objectification and sexualization of the workers they imply.

questions of national and gendered portrayals and expectations within the context of globalization.

Before examining these larger issues in relation to the sexualized representation of *maquiladora* workers in *Desert Blood,* one must reflect on how the socio-cultural construction of Juárez is unavoidably connected to the *maquiladora* industry. This can be easily accounted for considering that 278 operating plants work in this border city, employing more *maquila* workers (196, 500) than any other city in Mexico in 2007.[52] Now, at this point it seems imperative to contemplate that while all these socio-cultural conceptions of *juarense* women in one way or another hint at their supposed predominance in the composition of the *maquiladora* workforce, actual statistics paint a diametrically different picture. Susan Tiano, for instance, analyzes the information provided by the INEGI (Mexican National Census Bureau), which confirms that "by 1998, the proportions of men and women in border *maquiladoras* were almost equal" (85) and that afterwards the number of women employed in the industry has steadily (albeit slightly) declined. The crucial aspect to consider in regards to this information is that while the popular perception of an overwhelmingly feminized *fronteriza* workforce is clearly not factual, textual representations such as *Desert Blood* continue to perpetuate this notion in border imaginaries.

This imagined prevalence of women in the *maquiladora* scenario only serves as fodder for the misogynist paranoia implied in the aforementioned patriarchal association with the figure of the "fallen woman." In Gaspar de Alba's novel, this particular border stereotype is further reproduced in this dialogue between Ivon and her cousin Ximena.

> 'Do they [the *maquiladora* workers] *turn* into whores […] or is it just how people perceive them because they have jobs outside the home?'

---

[52] Source: INEGI (qtd. in http://www.juarez.gob.mx/negocios/industria.php)

'Whatever, […] nobody respects them. Some don't have a choice, you know. They got kids to feed and they can't do that on their pitiful salaries' (Gaspar de Alba 211).

Other than the surprising textual suggestion that working class women have no other option but to prostitute themselves in order to make a living, the preceding dialogue suggests exactly how important social perceptions can be in shaping of a specific gendered image.[53] Furthermore, the persistent sexualization of the *maquiladora* worker in turn makes her an "obvious" candidate to become a victim of feminicide in the border imaginaries, owing to the warped but seemingly widespread view in patriarchal societies that the murder of a "whore" is justifiable.

In reality though, studies have shown that the percentage of murdered women in Chihuahua who actually worked at a *maquiladora* is quite small.[54] However, the manner in which this link continues to turn up in popular and textual representations (including *Desert Blood*) —as does the inaccurate connection between the murders and migration to the city— must still be underscored.[55] It is my belief that both associations (to *maquiladora* workers and to migrants to Juárez) reinforce the image of feminine helplessness by means of their assumed socioeconomic disempowerment: a portrayal that keeps them as vulnerable *victims* within a

---

[53] On this note, Pablo Vila, a sociologist specialized in the US-Mexico border, has pointed out how the image of Juárez as a "city of vice" extends to the moral judgment of its women, particularly the *maquiladora* workers, as easy. As replicated in *Desert Blood*, the common narratives that explain this characterization contend that these blue-collar workers have to prostitute themselves because of the low salaries they perceive or that they used to be prostitutes before working at the *maquiladoras* (Vila, *Border Identifications* 12). While these types of narratives can be explained from a feminist perspective as originated by a patriarchal fear of increased feminine independence, what must not be forgotten is their link to the feminicides in the Juárez imaginary, in a twisted but common justification for the killings.

[54] It is known that 10.4% of 442 cases registered between 1993 and 2005, were factory workers, according to the report elaborated by Julia Monárrez Fragoso ("Las Diversas Representaciones" 360).

[55] In Monárrez's aforesaid report, 60 % of the victims of feminicide were found to be natives to the State of Chihuahua, a figure that contradicts the popular perception of the victims as "lonely migrants from the South" (Monárrez, "Las Diversas Representaciones" 358).

borderland symbology. Again, part of this victimization can also be traced back to a misogynist conceptualization of the "proper place" of women in Mexican society, a view that excludes women who work and/or who migrate.

A prime example of the manner in which the novel links the *maquiladora* workers with the Juárez feminicide is provided when the protagonist ponders: "The tragedy of their lives did not begin when their desecrated bodies were found in a deserted lot. The tragedy began as soon as they got jobs at the *maquiladoras*" (Gaspar de Alba 331). This reflection seems to advance the notion within the novel that the connection between the murders and the *maquiladoras* is only the beginning, and not the solution to the puzzle. And while a statement such as this could lead the reader to believe that *Desert Blood* is taking a purely ideological, anti-globalization stance by placing all the blame for the predicament of *juarense* women on the *maquiladoras*, the novel's varied appraisals of who is behind these murders attest to the contrary. And yet, it is true that the novel does not actually manage to explain why the "tragedies" of Juárez have not occurred in other globalized, *maquila* havens. I believe this is due to its textual objective being clearly the creation of awareness of feminicide and not the critical analysis of this phenomenon. In a sense, some of *Desert Blood*'s final reflections about the murders sum up all these theories, regarding the feminicides as: "A cost-effective way of disposing of non-productive/reproductive surplus labor while simultaneously protecting the border from infiltration from brown breeding female bodies" (Gaspar de Alba 333). More than globalization as personified exclusively by the *maquiladoras*, this quote obviously contemplates a rare point of view among analysts of the Juárez feminicide: that the socioeconomic processes that serve as a background to the murders may comprise a certain other *national* actor —aside from Mexico.

Furthermore, Ivon's thoughts about a possible explanation for the feminicides echo the impression that paradoxically, the woman who works in these industries could readily be construed as both destabilizing for the powers that be and easily exploited. As already noted, the first sense of her subversion would lie in the supposed assault that her labor entails to the patriarchal standard of feminine roles within the family. On the other hand, in the material exploitation of the female worker lies her only value for the capitalist, neo-liberal model. Because of this, the image of these employees as *disposable* is reinforced, more so as the cheap sub-employment in the US-Mexico border is progressively endangered by global competition from even cheaper workforces, such as the one found in China.

Another seemingly "jeopardized" element of border imaginaries that works in connection with the feminicides is related to constructions of Mexican masculinity within a particularly chauvinist brand of nationalism. In *Desert Blood*, the patriarchal universe where men are expected to support their families props up the following explanation regarding the murders: "The women are being sacrificed to redeem the men for their inability to provide for their families, their social emasculation, if you will, at the hands of the American corporations" (Gaspar de Alba 252). This rather overarching observation presupposes several preconceived ideas that support and bring together both "morality-based" and globalization-related rationalizations on the Juárez feminicides.[56] Firstly, the expectation of traditional roles for men and women is subverted by the belief that women are "taking men's jobs" —and therefore

[56] This view from the novel would then seem to support an assertion such as "feminicide is the 'blood price' the nation pays for globalization" (Fregoso, "Voices without Echo" 142) but it would add the further complication of an assault to the patriarchal system via Mexican masculinities.

becoming like American women— at the *maquiladoras*.[57] This then amounts to a case of nationalist wounded pride, as it somehow implies that by the intrusion of the U.S.-American industries into the socio-economical dynamics of the Mexican patriarchal system, the nation itself —represented by the men's virility as providers— is being insulted, a crime that figuratively demands women's deaths.

Considering in that case that feminized blue-collar labor could be represented as lethally insulting to the *national* pride, the idea of Juárez as *la mejor frontera de México* is clearly shown to be a desert mirage. And yet, a patent association between the murders of *juarense* women and the Mexican state is not emphatically favored in *Desert Blood*. This might be initially explained by the textual stress of the novel on the connection between the feminicides and the *maquiladoras* within the context of globalization, viewing the factories as somehow detached from the Mexican nation. Furthermore, the repeated accusations coming from human rights organizations regarding the complicity of the Mexican state with the feminicides, due to the fiascos of the regulatory and judicial systems (Fregoso, "Voices Without Echo" 143), are not seriously addressed in *Desert Blood.* In fact, the main allegation of corruption and impunity in the novel is directed towards the US-American authorities, personified mainly by the perverted Border Patrol agent who runs the snuff ring.

Another significant textual omission in the focus of *Desert Blood* pertains to the depiction of the women of Juárez not related to the *maquiladoras.* Now, when they do appear, these female characters are basically meant to stand in for the *juarense* activists that protest against the feminicide, for the reporters who cover the story of the murders (Gaspar de Alba 44),

---

[57] Scholars of Latin American masculinities seem to agree that "financially supporting one's family and work in general are without a doubt central defining features of masculinity" (Gutmann 13). The link between this trait and a nationalist hubris is my own.

and for other middle and upper-class Mexican women and *muchachas.* It is quite noteworthy that in Gaspar de Alba's novel, the portrayal of these women is fairly secondary to its overall spotlight on the feminicides, a factor that helps to concentrate textual attention on the figure of the poor *juarense* woman. This attention emphazises the paradoxical representation of the subaltern victim that has already been discussed, a representation that is even more problematic when placed side by side with other female depictions in *Desert Blood*. This is so because none of the well-off *juarense* women nor the Chicana protagonists are ever construed as casualties of feminicide, which raises questions as to why, within the universe of the novel, are lower-class brown Mexican women not allowed to survive the appalling situation in Juárez. In comparison, even the figure of Ivon as a doubly marginalized character —explained, within a border context, by being a lesbian *and* a Chicana— is better off than the Mexican victims of feminicide portrayed in *Desert Blood*.

This is a point well taken by Alicia Schmidt Camacho, who further warns against the *naturalization* of gender violence in the specific space of Juárez, thus "reinstating the very structures that mark women and girls as natural victims, as bodies made for violence" ("Body Counts" 51). And this may well be the most contradictory aspect of *Desert Blood*: its contribution to the subalternization of *juarense* women by keeping them *stereotyped* as victims of feminicide, thus adding to the instances of problematic cultural representations overcoming reality —such as the inaccurate prevalence of *maquiladora* workers among the murdered. Consequently, ideas in the vein of "La frontera es el espacio geográfico de la subalternidad" ['The border is the geographical space of subalternity'] (Monárrez Fragoso y Tabuenca Córdoba 10), while arguably factual, do not leave any leeway for the agency of *juarense* women in texts like *Desert Blood*.

In the novel, then, the *sine qua non* condition of victimhood is vulnerability and it is mainly based in a lack of voice, a seemingly inescapable silencing tied to the depiction of the women of Juárez as worthless through the sexualized image that their society has of them. Furthermore, in Gaspar de Alba's book, the portrayal of a Mexican maternity doomed to failure unintentionally serves to replicate a condition of inferiority and even a certain degree of patronizing of these women, especially when compared to the final textual success of the US-American mothers in "rescuing" an almost destitute Mexican child. Finally, it is essential to keep in mind that this portrait of *juarense* women as victims inadvertently strengthens particular hegemonic positions —patriarchy's control of women and globalization's structures of exploitation— that marginalize border women in general.

Gaspar de Alba's novel does manage to insert itself into a unique position with respect to other voices that have denounced the Juárez feminicides. As a U.S.-American cultural product, it is able to provide a fairly detached point of view that "allows" it to identify different borderlands players as responsible parties for the killings of women more explicitly than the majority of the local texts who have delved into this matter. Thus, the unique perspective of *Desert Blood* —its academic and Mexican-American background— examines the situation in Juárez far beyond the regional and local levels, implying, for instance, that the United States and its border policies play a bigger role in the impunity of the feminicides than is commonly believed. Furthermore, the distinctive viewpoint of the novel, while centering its attention on the victims of feminicide, significantly differs from most Mexican versions in that its depiction of *juarense* women is not trapped by the representational paradox of *having* to emphasize their innocence. This is because *Desert Blood*, while advocating for the murdered women, does not have to actually confront the sexualized and therefore, devalued, portrayals of the victims that are circulated in Juárez since it

can be seen as an "outsider" text. Hence, the novel can provide a very dissimilar standpoint from the one put forward by activist-inspired representations. I will elaborate on the depictions of both victims and activists, as well as their associated paradoxes, in the examination of *La Batalla de las Cruces*.

1.2 *La Batalla de las Cruces*, or The activists strike back.

> "Lo importante de estos grupos es que se dio voz a las mujeres." ['The important thing about these groups is that they gave voice to women.']
> Esther Chávez Cano, *La Batalla de las Cruces*.[58]

2003 was as a breakthrough year for activists seeking to give a voice to the murdered women of Juárez. Firstly, the appearance of the Amnesty International report on the subject in 2003 was the culmination of ten years of constant efforts by several NGOs and other committed individuals to bring international attention to the problem. The feminicides achieved a degree of conspicuousness that resulted in levels of interest far beyond the city and state limits, and lead to the international negative attention that all levels of the Mexican government wanted to avoid. While the bubble of democratic change seemed to have popped for President Fox long before the middle part of his term, the sight of thousands of protesters crossing into Juárez on February 14th, 2004 as part of the V-Day and Amnesty International march, could not have helped his intentions to present Mexico —politically and economically— as a modern 21st century country.

A rather unintentional outcome of the international attention was the appearance of the *fronteriza* activist as an increasingly relevant figure in the cultural imaginary pertaining to Juárez. With this in mind, I selected *La Batalla de las Cruces* [*Of Battles and Crosses*] as the text that best illustrates the different embodiments of the activist in contrast with other representations where the portrayal of women-as-victims still overshadows all others.[59] In my analysis, I will consider that, by centering on the figure of the activist, *La Batalla de las Cruces* cannot escape two exceptionally important paradoxes of the *juarense* feminicide. Firstly, there is

---

[58] I will mostly use the film's English subtitles for the translation from Spanish.
[59] The name of this film was probably inspired by an Independence battle that took place in 1810. Hidalgo and Allende defeated the royalists in Monte de las Cruces, Estado de México. The link of the title to the crosses in Juárez will be explained subsequently.

the paradox of representation, in which activists cannot seem to be represented in any other way than as the embodiment of the voice of the victims, thus existing only in relation to death. A second, related, contradiction arises from the paradoxical manifestations of a gendered subalternity in the public sphere. That is to say, as long as the activists articulate the demands for justice of a doubly marginalized sector of society —working class women— the issue of their *presence* in the hegemonic public arena will continue to be contested via the sexualization of the victims and of the activists themselves, by means of derogatory discourses about the "public woman." The activists then face the dilemma of how to counter slurs that "discredit" them without implicitly acquiescing to the same parameters that deem them unfit as "proper" feminine agents. Now, in *La Batalla de las Cruces* in particular, even as the images of victims and activists coexist in an act of balance, there is yet, within the portrayal of the activist, another significant and at times conflicting dyad worth taking into account. This refers to the mothers and other family members who lost a loved one to feminicide, in opposition to NGO "specialists" who may work to change societal dynamics in other fields in addition to their efforts against the impunity of the murders of women in Juárez. The crucial questions of class, rights of representation and speaking agency that emerge from the comparison of both of these portrayals will be further examined in this section as well.

In the same manner in which *Desert Blood* was contextualized in relation to other texts written about the victims of feminicide, I would like to situate *La Batalla de las Cruces* within a similar panorama of cultural representations before proceeding to a more in-depth analysis of the issues raised by this documentary film. While there are at least ten more documentaries on the Juárez murders, plus a couple of B-movies and *telenovela*-style productions from both sides of the border, the *presence* of the activist in them tends to become sidelined by that of the *absent*

victim.[60] This is true even of Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada* (2001), possibly the best-known documentary film on the subject of feminicide.[61] Here, Rosa Linda Fregoso argues that this film's emphasis on the depiction of victimhood —that extends to the families of the murdered women— is eminently apparent in the aesthetics of the film, which emphasize the innocence of the murdered victim ("We Want Them Alive!" 125). The other larger point that the film insistently makes is the denunciation of the ineptitude of the media and of local and federal governments to provide any kind of support for these families, moral or otherwise. Both of these characteristics place *Señorita Extraviada* towards one end of the continuum of representations of the Juárez feminicide, where the voice of the activists is mostly drowned by the silence of the dead women.

The other end of this spectrum of portrayals clearly includes *La Batalla de las Cruces* because of its repeated links to all the different variants of activism that work against the impunity of feminicide in Juárez. Nevertheless, this film and other texts like it have an important antecedent in *El Silencio que la Voz de Todas Quiebra* (1999), a book that originated in a creative literature workshop in Juárez. *El Silencio* works as a primary example of how fictional

[60] The TV Azteca production (the second largest Mexican TV conglomerate) *Ciudad Juárez: Tan Infinito como el Desierto* (2004), is one of the most interesting examples of popular culture's interpretation of the feminicide. While the character of the activist is significant, the protagonist is an upper-class reporter that ends up in Juárez investigating the disappearance and murder of her nanny's daughter. This TV series is a good showcase for the different theories surrounding the feminicides but its format tends to treat too many lines of investigation without the adequate depth, for which it was both criticized and praised by activists in Juárez.

[61] The only major Hollywood film about this topic, *Bordertown* (2006), directed by Gregory Nava, encountered significant problems for its release in movie theaters in the United States and only became available in DVD in 2008. Starring Jennifer López, the movie follows a victimization model similar to that of *Desert Blood*, with the exception of its final scene, where the U.S.-American protagonist is rescued by a Mexican woman who survived a brutal attack. *Bordertown*, unlike other texts on feminicide, does showcase the figure of the activist but I believe it somewhat undermined it with the casting of Antonio Banderas in the role of an honest Mexican newsman who is the main advocate for the victims of feminicide.

narrative and journalist-style reporting were first combined around the subject of the murders of women in Juárez. In this text, six cases of feminicide were chosen at random and recreated in fiction (based on interviews with family members). These accounts were meant to celebrate the lives of these murdered young women, and they were contrasted in the text with a series of investigative essays that attempted to make sense of contradictory official reports on the murders.[62] While the mixed format of the book makes it less effective as a narrative device than *La Batalla de las Cruces*, it is certainly recognized as the main predecessor of activist-inspired cultural representations on this topic (Gaspar de Alba 343), for bringing about an awareness of feminicide at a time when *juarense* grassroots consciousness was still being consolidated.

Appearing at a time when many of these local organizations have either disappeared or evolved in light of the continued inability of the *juarense* authorities to end the feminicide, *La Batalla de las Cruces* could be viewed as a summary of the issues and conflicts arising from women's activism in this border area. This is partly explained by this documentary's origin in a research project that intends to focus, according to its full title, on the social protests and actions that have arisen as a result of the decade-long scourge of feminicides in Juárez.[63] Here, the figure of *la activista* comes forth in its multiple embodiments: from the bereaved mother who now campaigns for basic public services in the poorest *colonias* of the city to the director-

---

[62] One of the most noteworthy features of this text is that it deviates (at least in one of the cases) of the representation of the innocent virgin and *hija de familia* so prevalent in other works. Another example of this alternative representation is *Mujer Alabastrina*, a novel by Víctor Bartoli, a *juarense* autor. In a quite provocative fashion, the text reveals the voices of *maquiladora* workers who lead active and unfortunate sexual lives within a society that spurns them for doing so.

[63] This research project has been conducted by academics Patricia Ravelo Blancas and Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba and supported by Conacyt and CIESAS. In Spanish the project is called "Protesta Social y Acciones Colectivas en torno de la Violencia Sexual en Ciudad Juárez." ["Social Protest and Collective Actions surrounding Sexual Violence in Ciudad Juárez."]

founders of well-recognized local organizations such as Casa Amiga and Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa.[64] Even the title of the film in English, "Of Battles and Crosses," prefigures the struggle of activists and makes their role central to its narrative.

Now, one of the key aspects to take into account in the analysis of *La Batalla de las Cruces* is that it offers a particularly *academically-oriented* representation of the advocates who work against feminicide and gender violence in the border. In fact, its director, Rafael Bonilla Pedroza, has explicitly mentioned that the film ―made in collaboration with sociologist Patricia Ravelo Blancas from CIESAS― developed from:

> La urgente necesidad de que los medios no se constituyan en amplificadores de la superficialidad, la misoginia y el morbo, y la no menos urgente necesidad de que investigaciones serias y profundas cuenten con los medios para ampliar su espectro de influencia. [The urgent need for the media not to amplify superficiality, misogyny and morbidity, and the equally urgent need for serious and thorough research to have the means to expand its scope of influence.][65]

From Bonilla's words, one can extrapolate what has been an uneasy relationship between local media players ―who have tended more towards a *nota roja* approach to feminicide― and Mexican and U.S.-American researchers, who display a more didactic take on this issue. Furthermore, it is important to note that this statement implies that scholarly investigations can expect significant limitations to the extent in which their portrayals will be "consumed" by an

---

[64] *Colonia*, the traditional name for "neighborhood," has a different connotation in Juárez as it refers to the shantytowns of the city's periphery. Casa Amiga, founded by Esther Chávez Cano, is the only rape and abuse crisis center in Ciudad Juárez but it was originally set up in response to the feminicides. Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa is arguably the prime local organization still working to pressure the authorities to solve the feminicides and it is mainly composed of family members and friends of murdered victims.

[65] Source: <http://www.uam.es/boletin/index_archivos/Sintesis.doc>

audience outside academia. In the following discussion of *La Batalla de las Cruces*, I will consider the question of whether the format of a documentary can actually make inroads into popular depictions concerning the Juárez feminicide.

The overall structure of the film keeps with one of the four fundamental functions of documentary film, "to persuade or promote" (Renov 21). In this case, as it is with the majority of documentaries pertaining to the Juárez feminicides, the element of promotion refers to the implicit purpose of advancing the viewers' awareness of the conditions of gendered violence in this border city. Alas, the complete fulfillment of this goal assumes that the film would be able to extend its reach beyond an audience that may already be sensitive to this situation. As for the objective of persuasion, the spectators of *La Batalla de las Cruces* can readily assume that the film means to influence them towards taking action against the impunity surrounding these crimes, a step that many may feel unable to take. And yet, Bonilla's film insists on stressing these unstated aims by keeping to its educational approach, in which the viewer is methodically introduced to the main themes of the documentary.

La Batalla de las Cruces, then, is divided into thematic sections announced by on-screen titles, with the exception of the first shot and the conclusion. The initial take pans around a desert-like scenario where photographs of young women are semi-buried in the sand. This is used as a flashback throughout the movie, arguably to redirect the viewer's attention to the victims. The opening voice-over begins by stating "A large majority of the murdered women were from the south."[66] If one were only to consider this establishing shot and initial words, it would seem that this film is playing into the *stereotypes* that present the figure of the marginalized victim —not originally from Chihuahua— as the main portrayal for the murdered

[66] The film's translation (in subtitles).

women, exactly like so many other texts. Here, Homi Bhabha's definition of a stereotype is perhaps the most fitting, as it is characterized as: "a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that […] constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject" (*The location of culture* 107). Such a statement is noteworthy because it highlights the difficulties inherent in any attempt to maneuver outside of a stereotyped depiction, particularly when others make an effort to speak for these victims. As long as the women keep being perceived as helpless, lonely and silent in the imaginary of the city and of the border, they cannot be perceived as having a voice or even subject status.

At first, the introduction of *La Batalla de las Cruces*, where the names of eight murder victims materialize on screen, also appears to comply with the victim paradigm, but soon this perspective starts to change. Each name comes into view with a photograph of the young woman when she was alive, and in every case, a family member of the deceased speaks about the initial disappearance, thus placing the film in the appalling context of "A decade of impunity and violence towards women." The advent of these relatives in the beginning of the movie situates them in a prominent position textually, as the future protagonists of the documentary narrative, and in contrast to the cast of "experts" one expects in this kind of films. And while these brief interviews with the family members may initially seem to reproduce the noxious fascination with this kind of stories that one may find in a *nota roja* periodical, the film's in-depth viewpoint contradicts this impression as it moves forward. It does so particularly by legitimizing the relatives' right to *speak for* the victims. In fact, the names of these family members do not appear

until much later in the film, thus reinforcing the impression that —at least in the beginning— their main role is to lend their voices to the victims they represent.[67]

It is not surprising that the family members who do turn into activists against the *juarense* feminicide, as well as the female members of advocacy organizations, tend not to immediately occupy a *public* space of their own. As has been mentioned earlier, this hesitance originates in the perceived societal "contradiction" of their public appearance in demonstrations with a patriarchally expected domestic/private status. In other words, it is the act of protest itself which situates them and "discredits" them as "public women" along with the murder victims who dared to work or go out at night (Wright, "Paradoxes" 279). Therefore, the lack of space in Mexican popular culture for the figure of the woman activist is hardly unanticipated, precisely because it appears to be too controversial within the context surrounding Juárez in general. This disparaging representation as "public women" may also be the root as to why some activists have taken such great pains in representing the victims as sexually innocent *hijas de familia* or as responsible daughters, working *only* to help support their families. In *La Batalla de las Cruces,* the photographs of the victims as angelical *quinceañeras* or the mention of the jobs some of them held, are certainly part of the characterization of the murdered victims as "private" (*decentes*) rather than "public" (*indecentes*) young women.

However, this recreation of a private/public woman dichotomy is certainly a thorny one for female activist groups, as it perpetuates sexist paradigms that attempt to keep them off the streets as protesters and that question the intrusion of the murdered women into public spaces in the first place (Wright, "Paradoxes" 282). My own reading is that Bonilla's documentary does its best to showcase the difficulties to distinguish between local, culturally relevant strategies of

[67] It is quite telling that some names are easily recognizable for they appear in so many documents: Sagrario González, Lilia Alejandra García, Silvia Elena Rivera.

representation —such as the ubiquitous *quinceañera* pictures of the victims— and what are mostly mediated images of femininity (virginal, "pure" girls), directly derived from patriarchy. If one considers that, for a stereotype to exist, the adjectives related to it must be "constantly contradictory," it is plain to see how this can lead to a facile depiction of the Other as "sexualized *and* innocent" at the same time (Bhabha, *The location of culture* 82, emphasis mine). And yet, for the *juarense* activists, the contradictory portrayals of themselves and of the victims of feminicide they represent are only one of the many struggles they have to face.

La Batalla de las Cruces addresses these events in a chronological fashion, beginning with the moment when the young women are reported missing. Thus, the first thematic title that is shown on screen is "Desaparecer" ["To Disappear"]. Here, one must note the significance of choosing this politically charged term, particularly in Latin America, as it brings back extremely unnerving recollections of "Dirty War" tactics used by authoritarian governments in the 70s and 80s.[68] It is also remarkable that the filmmakers utilize this crucial term to contrast positions between "experts" and one family member in the beginning of the documentary, by pitting divergent views of the authorities and the activists. Firstly, Ángela Talavera, the Special Prosecutor for Female Homicides in the State of Chihuahua in 2005, states that a disappearance is not technically considered a crime under Mexican law, but that it is nevertheless treated as a "preliminary investigation," and that from their standpoint, the first hours looking for women who have "disappeared" are the most vital ones. This is obviously not enough for Rosario Acosta, the aunt of 10-year old victim Cynthia Rocío Acosta, or for Marisela Ortiz, founder of Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, who plainly calls the authorities liars, claiming that the police

[68] Rosa Linda Fregoso goes as far as to imply that the Mexican state in fact wages a war against these marginalized women with its failure to protect them and its inability to prevent a climate of fear in the border ("Voices without Echo" 144).

routinely waste those precious first hours. By presenting the figure of "328 women murdered in Juárez from 1993 to 2004" (Source: Chihuahua State Prosecutor's Office), the film cleverly takes sides with the latter position in this argument.

Apart from contrasting the patently differing views on the feminicides of the authorities in Juárez and the activists, *La Batalla de las Cruces* takes an uncommon look at the divergences that have arisen between activists, concerning their dissimilar stances with regard to the composition and aims of their organizations. The section "Documentación y denuncia" ["Documentation and denunciation"] begins this discussion. Here, an initial point of contention between the two best known *juarense* activists, Esther Chávez Cano and Marisela Ortiz, revolves around what they believe are the originating factors for the feminicide. While the former stresses intra-familial violence, the latter disregards this argument as one aligned with government versions that basically "protect the real assassins." Ortiz goes on to support the line of reasoning which deems that "these women were killed by people they didn't know […] simply because they are women, were women, who had absolutely no power." And while one could argue the total opposite, that these women were targeted precisely because of their perceived empowerment and all its negative connotations, the point is that there are no single interpretations that can be offered to comprehensively elucidate the Juárez feminicides.

Yet, *La Batalla de las Cruces* incessantly proposes urgent explanations. For instance, the three sections titled "Violencia," "Estadísticas," e "Inicios," ["Violence," "Statistics" and "Beginnings"] continue introducing the cast of "experts" in the documentary while at the same time, proposing several theories about the feminicide in relation to the statistical breakup of alleged causes of murder. Then, the list of regrettably familiar usual suspects: "serial killers, […] organized crime, […] *snuff* movies, organ traffic, […] lone assassins, […] gangs of drivers,

police and detectives" is symbolically linked to the close up of a cross that stands at one of the border passages with heavier traffic. This cross is riddled with nails that bear a pink ribbon with the name of a missing or murdered woman, and activists throughout the city have placed others like it since 1999 as a reminder. These crosses have been interpreted as a means to make the feminicides visible ("Presentación" 4). One could also extrapolate that, in a way, the crosses represent the burdens of memory that the family members have to bear. In any case, the strong religious connotation of this symbol must not be overlooked, as it could be problematically associated with more traditional views, reminiscent of the "public woman" dilemma. Additionally, Rosa Linda Fregoso, in the article "Voices Without Echo," explains the pink crosses as a way of representing the unspeakable, the unrepresentable; as marking the victims as a *class* of targeted people (147). Now, one of the difficulties inherent to this explanation is that by categorizing *juarense* women into a collective *presence*, a certain de-individuation is bound to occur, one that paradoxically reproduces their lack of agency by concentrating primarily on the space of *absence* left behind by the victims.

It is precisely this absence that is fiercely contested by the family members of the murdered women throughout *La Batalla de las Cruces.* Therefore, subsequent sections of the film, such as "Búsqueda" y "Hallazgo" ["Search" and "Discovery"] focus more on the mothers' strategies as they expound the array of actions taken in their search of justice for their missing daughters, from posting flyers all over the city to protesting, along with other groups, the incompetence of the authorities in the prevention and investigation of the crimes. On this note, though, one would do well to consider Alicia Schmidt's reflection that, at the end of the day, "the mothers' movement consists of the small percentage of women who were able to mobilize the material and psychological resources to act publicly as the bearers of injustice" ("Ciudadana X"

272). And yet, the film documents how this is an extremely difficult path to choose, as these mothers and other activists have had more than an uphill battle in their struggle, to the point that some have even received anonymous death threats and have been physically assaulted by the police and other unidentified individuals.

In order to expand on this discussion of the *juarense* "mothers' movement," it would be convenient to revisit an important cultural referent that comes to mind while examining the interviews with *las madres de* Juárez in *La Batalla de las Cruces*: the similarities they share with the most famous maternal-driven Latin American activist group, *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. While both of these representations conjure up the *Mater Dolorosa* archetype, the Mexican women "who have lost their daughters to inexplicable violence; only [...] find that the border society refuses to recognize their claim to violated motherhood" (Schmidt, "Body Counts" 31). This bespeaks of a widespread misogynist prejudice that can only conceive of blaming the victims and by extension, their families. In Bonilla's documentary, the lack of sympathy that the family members receive from the authorities is shown to extend the patriarchal accusation of not taking "proper" care of young women, expressed in interrogations such as: "she was your daughter, so where the hell did you leave her?" Moreover, there are relatives in the film who recall feeling questioned and even threatened when they lodged the complaint of their loved ones' disappearance with the police or tried to distribute flyers. An additional but paradoxical difference with *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* is that while the mothers in Juárez ultimately depend on the state for the procurement of justice for their daughters, the Argentine women directly blamed the state for the disappearance of their children (Schmidt, "Body Counts" 49). And yet, as *La Batalla de las Cruces* shows in the section "Cartel de Policías" ["Police Cartel"], the *juarense* relatives similarly believe "that police are behind it all," not only

because they don't solve these crimes but because the family members think they are protecting the actual killers. Without going as far as claiming state-sponsored violence, the assessment of the mothers in the film often coincides with that of the experts, as all of them insistently comment on the climate of impunity that asphyxiates Juárez.

In fact, with respect to the analysis of the murders, *La Batalla de las Cruces* does not shy away from hinting at the responsibility of powerful entities for the Juárez feminicide. One of the most articulate voices in the film, Diana Washington Valdés —a journalist from El Paso who has reported on this subject extensively— traces the successive cover-ups and fraudulent incriminations that have led her to believe that serial killers, gangs and powerful drug traffickers, as well as the police are involved in the crimes.[69] In the sections "Culpables. Inocentes," "Víctimas. Victimarios" y "Gobierno," ["Guilty. Innocent," "Victims. Perpetrators" and "Government"] her professional point of view and that of other "specialists" are compared to the more experiential one of the mothers, thus legitimizing the narrative as a whole. That is to say, the film earns an "emotional" justification from presenting the claims of the victims' families but manages to obtain a "scientific" validation of its outlook on the *juarense* feminicide by also communicating the positions held by academics, journalists, and directors of governmental, professional and non-governmental organizations.

One of the distinctive qualities of Bonilla's film is precisely this rendering of the array of viewpoints that emanate from the different activist groups. In the section "Organismos No Gubernamentales" ["Non-Governmental Organizations"], *La Batalla de las Cruces* focuses more

[69] Diana Washington also has a "cameo" appearance in *Desert Blood* when Detective McCuts thinks of calling her at El Paso Times, so she can expose the increasing number of sex offenders in the American city (Gaspar de Alba 273).

acutely on the conflicts inscribed in the representation of the *juarense* activists.[70] At this point, the viewer may note the most open depiction of the tensions between groups, initially exemplified by the questioning of the funding of some organizations —such as the Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer [Institute for Women of the State of Chihuahua], which depend financially on the state government.

Another point of contention between activist associations —which is also reflected in this documentary— touches upon the reported clashes between groups composed primarily of victims' relatives and those which may be more heterogeneous in their constitution.[71] Firstly, there is a great contrast between the educational and socioeconomic level of groups founded exclusively by family members and other, so-called "professional" NGOs. Here, Patricia Ravelo, the main researcher for the film, further argues that these organizations "don't train [the mothers] to be self-managing, to strengthen themselves, to empower themselves."[72] Nevertheless, there are numerous examples in the documentary that counter this statement somewhat, as they show mothers founding their own organizations or working to provide childcare or electricity to their impoverished *colonia*. These instances, while limited, support the idea that the moral discourse of grief, in order to be effective, must be attached to claims for socio-economic justice and for the most basic human rights (Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!" 131). Nonetheless, the

[70] Rosa Linda Fregoso and other feminist academics from both sides from the border, have noted the evolution of local groups to include transnational advocacy partnerships ("We Want Them Alive!" 116).

[71] Some local activists have been acerbic in their criticism of what they view as a cooptation of a cause by groups like Casa Amiga (Rojas, "The 'V-Day' March" 220), which shifted its attention in its mission from the quest for justice for the murder victims, to the treatment and prevention of gender violence from a mainly domestic perspective.

[72] According to Melissa Wright, matters in this area have been aggravated by the accusation of the regional political elites that certain activist groups such as "Ni Una Más" profit by publicizing the pain of victims' families to international organizations like the press, academics and artists ("Public Women" 683).

prevailing impunity of feminicide makes the situation of the activists in Juárez much more complicated, as at times it appears that since none of their grievances are being properly addressed, the mothers of the murdered women understandably tend to refocus exclusively on their original demands for justice for their daughters.

And yet, according to Julia Monárrez in "El Sufrimiento de las Otras," this position of the activist mothers, derived solely from their sorrow, is liable to being manipulated by opposing factions. On the one hand, their particular entitlement to pain is used by hegemonic groups to pit them against other organizations who fight against gender violence but whose members are not necessarily relatives of the murdered women (Monárrez, "El Sufrimiento de las Otras" 123). In *La Batalla de las Cruces*, the issue of who has the right to speak for the victims of feminicide is noticeably tilted towards the mothers as the voice-over states that "activism centered on the families' pain has resulted in mistrust and bad feelings."[73] On the other hand, the authorities and the local media have often interpreted the advocacy of the victims' family members as an example of the politicization of motherhood, a stance that —in this patriarchal environment— may have negative connotations of personal profit. Thus, the *juarense* mothers, much like the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* before them, have shared the affront of having been ostracized, misrepresented and insulted by regional elite groups. In Bonilla's film, for instance, Héctor Domínguez maintains that it is the politicians who routinely —and paradoxically— demand that "that the case of the murdered women shouldn't be politicized." The truth behind such a statement though, is that it plainly shows the disposition of the political establishment to deny the

[73] This rift between the "mothers" and the other activist groups is somewhat reminiscent of similar divisions between grassroots organizations and academics or between 1st and 3rd World feminists.

right of participation in politics to all women activists —mothers and non-mothers alike— and, as a result, effectively strips them of one of the most basic citizen rights.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of *La Batalla de las Cruces,* there are many other outrages to be accounted for in Juárez before even considering the questions of full political involvement. Once more, the issue of a damaging representation comes to the fore. From an academic and feminist perspective, the sections "Maquilocas" y "Noche" ["Maquila maddies crazies" and "Night"] are the ones that explain more thoroughly the sexualized, adverse portrayals of the victims by a considerable sector of the *juarense* society. To begin with, these segments comment more explicitly on the cultural association of *maquiladora* workers and "women of easy virtue" in relation with the feminicides. Here, Héctor Domínguez notes that with a new economic strength, "The Juárez night has been invaded by women, this clearly represents a serious threat to the patriarchal system" because of the implications of "allowing" unsupervised spaces for female sexuality in what used to be a purely masculine turf. An additional insight on this matter has been proposed by Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba in her article "Baile de Fantasmas," where she comments on how the narrative of power constructed by local and state authorities depicts the victims of feminicide as stereotyped social and moral transgressors (417). Within this misogynist perspective, it follows —as the documentary suggests— that the real or imagined sexual freedom of these "morally insubordinate" working-class women is being punished with death, particularly in the atmosphere of illegality that prevails in Juárez.

The ending sections of *La Batalla de las Cruces* take a head-on stance against this overarching state of unlawfulness. Thus, the segments "Sanción," "Reparación," "Prevención" e "Investigación" ["Sanction," "Reparation," "Prevention" and "Investigation"] specifically detail the activists' demands in a variety of fronts. Firstly, the film echoes the NGO's appeals for

"efficient services for the provision of justice and a political trial for the government officials […] who did nothing." This urgent request of the *juarense* activists has been widely documented by social science researchers from both sides of the border, who have recorded the advocates' attempts to embarrass the federal, state and local governments internationally for their ineptitude in the investigation, prevention and resolution of the crimes (Fregoso, "We Want Them Alive!" 118).[74] Bonilla's documentary, in fact, specifies that one of the activists' ultimate goals is to press for the intervention of international organizations in the matter of the *juarense* feminicide, going as far as intending to take their case to the International Criminal Court. And yet, the women in the film have an even larger ambition in mind: "to change the misogynistic attitudes that predominate in the institutions and the legal system." Considering the multifaceted *juarense* misogyny that *La Batalla de las Cruces* works so painstakingly to expose, this may well be their most grueling struggle, for it involves matters of cultural representation that are very much embedded in the discourse of all kinds of hegemonic groups, who have managed to heavily influence the local perception concerning the victims of feminicide.

This is arguably the strongest denunciation that Bonilla's film makes, and it is directly connected to the notorious representation of the "public woman" previously discussed: that while societal attitudes do not change to be respectful of the human rights of all *juarense* women, there will be no solution to this gendered brand of border violence. In other words, "any legalistic response to the violence will remain inadequate if […] the culture of male dominance [is allowed

[74] Rosa Linda Fregoso has argued that the local groups' pressure that resulted in the Amnesty International report in 2003 was the prime factor that finally propitiated the intervention of the federal government in the case of the Juárez feminicide ("We Want Them Alive!" 120). Apart from this, I believe that the works of Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez —the groundbreaking journalistic chronicle *Huesos en el Desierto* (2002) and the special edition of the periodical *Metapolítica,* "Las Muertas de Juárez" (2003) — were instrumental to bringing the case of the Juárez feminicide to the consciousness of Mexico City's denizens, who would also become pivotal in demanding the federal government's involvement in this issue.

to] remain intact in the border" (Schmidt, "Ciudadana X" 281). For it is precisely the misogynist characterizations derived from masculine power in Juárez that disavow any other feminine portrayals that may deviate from a Virgin/Whore paradigm and that have ultimately lead to the society's implicit condoning of the murders of what are perceived as "public women." Thus, for the activist organizations featured in *La Batalla de las Cruces*, the *battle* is, fundamentally, one of representation. To its credit, the film does not overemphasize what could be termed as "patriarchally appropriate" depictions of victims and activists as compliant with traditional gendered behaviors. This is accomplished though the feminist perspective of the documentary, extensive to all the different *juarense* activists who, in some way or another, are working to promote a change in the cultural discourse and imaginary in such a way that it may include the so-called "public woman" (Wright, "Public Women" 696). Nevertheless, Bonilla's documentary, with its characteristically "homegrown" perspective which highlights the role of the mothers and their "genuine leadership," still has to resort to the strategy of having to portray activists preferentially as mothers and murder victims as daughters, an approach that still abides by the paradox of the "public woman" (Wright, "Paradoxes" 290).

Taking into account the manner in which *La Batalla de las Cruces* persistently calls the viewers' attention to the diverse figure of the *juarense* activists, it may seem somewhat surprising that the conclusion of the documentary, "Epílogo" ["Epilogue"], goes full-circle to the image of the victim of feminicide. This return of the film's gaze exclusively towards the murdered young women is significantly positioned to create an emotional impact through the use of a dramatic opera score (*Norma*), as well as the ending images that revisit the barren scenario of the desert. Rather ominously, the voice-over adds an important piece of information that had not been previously mentioned: that the murder victims have included women from other

nationalities, such as women from the United States and Europe. This allows the documentary to subsequently hint at the possibility that this gruesome phenomenon might overflow past the state of Chihuahua, thus working as the film's last attempt to convey a sense of urgency regarding the feminicides. In fact, the most recent data from Juárez suggests that the number of murdered women in this border city is on the rise and that the vision stemming from Bonilla's documentary might have been regrettably prophetic.[75] Additionally, the reference to non-Mexican victims of feminicide is also one of the few exceptions to the film's mostly regional overall approach to this matter, especially when compared to other texts such as *Desert Blood.*

With such a grim scenario and outlook, the closing take of *La Batalla de las Cruces* actually reflects on the multiple paradoxes that so intrinsically grip the representation of *las mujeres de* Juárez. Thus, the film's final and critical call to action is likely to remind the observant viewer that the fact "that people throughout the world know about the murders of Ciudad Juárez, that films and plays and articles are written about these murders owes everything to the women activists" (Wright, "Paradoxes" 289). And yet, these activists continue to be paradoxically effaced in favor of the victims of feminicide. In other words, Bonilla's film can only go halfway in the portrayal of activists as *independent* entities, inexorably positioning them almost entirely as representatives or mediums of the victims, merely channeling the voices of the dead. Now, while the "inconspicuousness" of the activists ―in contrast with the prominence of the victims― is certain to continue as long as the demand to solve the murders exists, it must still be noted that the figure of the activist-as-spokesperson has the potential of becoming a vital and radical female construction, particularly vis-à-vis the misogynist border setting that *La*

[75] From January to September 2008, 75 women have been killed in Juárez, of which 24 murders have been classified as sexual serial feminicides. Source: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/09/29/index.php?section=sociedad&article=047n1soc>

Batalla de las Cruces describes. Indeed, the documentary offers a glimpse into what could become a reappropriation of the maligned "public woman": provided that the activists keep on developing their ability to "speak for" others, they may truly have a chance of overcoming their voiceless, subaltern status.

However, the film never claims that positive, empowered representations of *juarense* women are close at hand. For starters, as long as impunity and misogyny remain entrenched in Juárez, the murdered women will still be protagonists and the activists will maintain their roles as "supporting characters" in the numerous narratives that the feminicides have understandably generated. Furthermore, even if female activists in Juárez may indeed have a wider representation in the film documentary media, it will continue to be difficult that their voices reverberate effectively into a greater variety of cultural products —including fictional texts and more widely consumed films— at least not while the figure of the victim is still the most important one in this border context.

Nonetheless, *La Batalla de las Cruces* must be credited with avoiding, for the most part, the overdramatization and prevalent emphasis in the victimization of the women in Juárez that can be observed in other texts. But this is not the only feature of this documentary that gives it a distinctive character in comparison with other works. By centering on the diversity of the activists who work against the feminicide, the film opens a rare space for all sorts of *juarense* women to discuss this issue and to have their voices heard. *La Batalla de las Cruces* accomplishes this even while addressing the rifts between advocate organizations, hinting that their lack of success at presenting a more united front in their struggle is due primarily to the bitterness concerning representational rights for the victims. And while Bonilla's film is clearly more sympathetic toward the mothers of the murdered women, it must also be noted that there is

enough nuance in its narrative to still provide a meaningful and mostly objective analysis of a situation that urgently needs to be exposed as widely as possible.

1.3 Reimagining the public woman as a matter of life or death: *Mujeres de Juárez.*

When attempting to plot the representations of women in Juárez, it is extremely difficult not to be overcome by the sense of despair created by the upsurge of violence that seems to have emanated from this border city to the rest of Mexico. What started as a virtual state of emergency for the women of Juárez appears to have extended to all major urban centers in the country: a similar vision of horror, of silence, of death, of impunity.

The case of Juárez sadly evinces the power of gendered violence at a massive scale. The numerous cultural texts that have surfaced from the *juarense* feminicides clearly show that the killings have almost fulfilled their unannounced but subtly insidious objective of terror: disallowing any female representation that does not comply with patriarchal stock images such as commonplace virgin/whore binaries. This plainly explains why the image of border women enjoying (relative) economic power and sexual independence is so dangerous, as they are daring to step outside of their stereotype as victims. In other words, diversification in the representation of *juarense* women beyond the victimhood generated by the feminicides is still a distant event. In this bleak context, it is easy to understand why the multifaceted figure of the activist has not yet registered into the cultural consciousness of Juárez as an example of female agency. To begin with, this may be due to the fact that this feminine representation is a combination of several elements that do not correspond exactly to the established patterns for "decent" Mexican women and mothers. The real tragedy of Juárez is that there appears to be little genuine societal will to imagine spaces for "other" women in a scenario devoid of fear and death.

Nevertheless, the question of why this phenomenon developed precisely in Juárez continues to be a haunting one. Clara Rojas suggests that this border city has suffered from "historical silences," which would mean that in the *juarense* cultural representation of feminine

submissiveness, there is no other way to picture anything else beyond these silences ("Reinventando" 86). My own reading propounds that the characterization of women of Juárez as victims is a significant factor in their becoming casualties of feminicide as their portrayal then follows a vicious circle of denigration of women. The advent of globalization into this equation appears to add to the cultural representation of the victim by figuratively categorizing all *juarense* women into the defamed stereotypes of *maquila* workers: either subservient conformists or worthless libertines. These conceptualizations then blend into the desert imaginary, a no-man's land, an eminently masculine frontier, eminently misogynist, eminently unpunished.

Within the cultural representations of feminicide, I have argued that *La Batalla de las Cruces* and *Desert Blood* are two sides of the same coin, even with respect to their postulations of how these crimes have originated and been "allowed" to remain unsolved and unpunished. Thus, keeping to what at times appear to be a division that stems from national origins, the film analyzes the Mexican side more thoroughly, posing feminicide as more of a home-grown problem, while the novel proposes globalization itself as a mythic villain of sorts, further implicating the United States as part of the *juarense* climate of impunity. As for the portrayal of women within this setting, apart from the aforementioned focus on activists in one text and on the victims in the other, it is noteworthy that both of them center their attention on the figure of the mother. This pivotal image in both works proves to be somewhat of a double-edged sword as on the one hand, it has the potential of trapping *juarense* women within the hegemonic cultural rules of patriarchy that preordain a "proper" (silenced, traditional) type of motherhood. On the other hand, though, as long as the image of the mother conjures up strong feelings of sympathy

and support in Mexico and abroad, there will continue to be a needed "emotional legitimacy" to the movement against feminicide.

Considering both the alarming increase in violent crimes in Mexico and the intolerable length of time of the phenomenon of feminicide in Juárez, it becomes more crucial than ever to theorize about possible links between these two occurrences. A first clue may reside in the question of why the representation of women-as-victims continues to be so prevalent, which I understand as an integral factor in the propagation of a climate of fear in Mexico. From my perspective, the powerful entities identified in *La Batalla de las Cruces* and in *Desert Blood* are poised to benefit from the continuance of this situation, as they are clearly banking on paralyzing apprehension to persist as a fundamental element of the dominant discourse in Mexico.[76] It is my belief that paralysis, fear and lack of solidarity are all factors that reinforce the inferior position of women in Juárez and diminish their capacity to change the status quo, thus creating more docile consumers and workers as well as more passive citizens. This situation leads to the current status quo where we are witnessing what appears to be a learned helplessness syndrome or an extensive state of shock of the Mexican civil society.[77] And yet, it is regrettable to note how this reaction of stupefaction has only come about after the dramatic increase in the numbers of murdered *men*, almost as if they were the only valuable or real citizens of the nation. While at

---

[76] While the economic circumstances brought by globalization to Juárez are signaled by *Desert Blood* as the main catalyst for the feminicides, it should not be forgotten that the United States government and its people are indirectly implied in the crimes as well (according to the novel) due to their indifference to this situation. For its part, *La Batalla de las Cruces* refers to more specific actors in the federal and local governments as the culprits for the impunity in the city, even though it also hints at the more vague offenders of misogyny and patriarchy as causes for feminicide.

[77] The learned helplessness condition is a psychological state where, after being subjected to repeated pain or unpleasantness, the human or the animal stops trying to avoid the negative situation, thus learning to become helpless.

times it appears that in Mexico it takes earthquakes and uprisings and million-people marches to counteract a dismaying state of affairs, at this juncture something as seemingly inconsequential as the reimagining of *juarense* activists as public women could very well spell out the beginning of hope for the future. The end of feminicide may be at hand when instead of chanting "Todos somos Marcos," Mexican people can finally shout in protest "Todas somos Juárez."[78]

[78] I borrowed the phrase of solidarity with the Zapatista movement with an awareness of the difference between both situations. Interestingly, the federal government started in February 2010 a program called "Todos somos Juárez," which according to the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH in Spanish), has not delivered the expected results. Source: http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/02/19/politica/011n2pol. The masculine form used in President Calderón's slogan should not go unnoticed.

Chapter 2. Welcome to Tijuana, city of public women.

Tijuana is not all of Mexico and it is not only Avenida Revolución. But for many, the seediest two or three blocks of this street, where stripe-painted donkeys (the infamous *zonkies*), tacky souvenir shops, anything-goes bars and strip joints abound, have become a favorite synecdoche for this particular border city and by extension, for the whole country. The reactions that this *pars pro toto* may conjure up range from revulsion to denial to lust, depending on the class, nationality, age and even location of the speaker. However, amongst the varieties and degrees of disgust and fascination with all things "forbidden" and "degenerate" that Tijuana as an idea may evoke, one might easily find a central, common, marginalized feminine representation: the prostitute. Thus, underneath the transgressive excitement of the *gringo* teenager, the disavowal of Tijuana's (high) cultural establishment and the bourgeois horror of central Mexico's upper classes lies —mainly metaphorically— the idea of a *public woman*, Tijuana-style.

Much like Juárez, though, the harsher aspects of the representation of Tijuana's women in the media and in other cultural products, tend to originate from a masculine perspective. This portrayal is based upon the aforementioned patriarchal scheme that suggests that, "women who infringe upon the public space remain scandalous" (Castillo, *Easy Women* 4). And while the actual women being depicted may or may not participate in Tijuana's sex trade, the fact is that in popular culture they are promptly implicated in their city's black legend in order to be stereotyped and thus controlled more efficiently. Now, the case of Tijuana is rather extraordinary in that one may also find cultural images that assertively reinterpret and (re)appropriate this iconic *mujer pública*. The purpose of this chapter will thus be to address the complexities and paradoxes of these uncommon representations of *tijuanense* women. In particular, I intend to

theorize on the specificity of these portrayals within the context of Tijuana, considering how these depictions alternatively negotiate marginality and agency, invisibility and notoriety, silence and voice.

This *mujer pública* of Tijuana has traditionally *walked* several paths in popular culture, films and written fiction on both sides of the border, arguably due to the titillating associations of her hypersexualized and sordid image. Nonetheless, these feminine representations have been little more than secondary characters in the majority of cultural texts by male border creators. This is why I have selected two bodies of work that not only feature *tijuanense* women as protagonists, but also textually consider the dilemmas generated by their portrayals either as public women or as women on the margins of society. At this juncture, the much overlooked *tijuanense* Rosina Conde offers three short stories that attest to her interest in depicting moments in the lives of working and middle class women from Tijuana as they confront different varieties of patriarchal mores. Another reason behind this choice is the prevalence of a clear feminist perspective in Conde's texts, which is also found in the second work to be analyzed, the documentary by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre, *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (2006). This film, which explores the connection between *maquiladora* workers and activism, makes for an interesting comparison with the scenario of female advocacy in Juárez, especially as it comes from a non-victimized, self-representational perspective in which the intersections of public and private spaces are amply explored.

Now, at this point of the analysis it would be wise to clarify that the concept of the *public woman* is being used here with a double meaning. Firstly, it refers to the euphemism of either actual prostitution or any other manners of "uncontrolled" female sexuality within a patriarchal system, namely "easy" or "loose" women. On the other hand, it is also employed as an

"umbrella-term" meant to reflect the patriarchal slur reserved for all those women who stray from their anticipated domestic sphere. In this particular cultural scenario of *la frontera*, it might be argued that the sexualization of women is embedded in both connotations, and yet, there may be certain irony in this defamed portrayal, as can be intuitively appreciated in the following quote.

> El carácter moral de signo negativo de la prostituta, es uno […] de sus contenidos culturales [;] por eso es atractiva la mala mujer y es *subversiva*, aún cuando esté profundamente oprimida por su condición. [The negatively marked moral character of the prostitute is one […] of its cultural contents [;] that is why the bad woman is attractive and *subversive*, even though she may be profoundly oppressed by her condition] (Lagarde 557, emphasis mine).[79]

Thus, already linked *per se* with an immoral and hypersexualized cultural construction, the public women depicted in the selected texts are, in some way or another, paradoxically "liberated" from having to defend their image as "ideal," "decent" women by patriarchal standards. In diverse appropriations of their radical representation as "fallen" women, they seize their right to speak and to be visible, even while remaining subaltern in work-related or in other social contexts.

It may be this ultimate condition of female subalternity that triggers the efforts of Tijuana's mostly masculine cultural-artistic elite to deflect national and international attention away from the marginalized, *feminized* and sexualized sites associated with Tijuana, such as the aforementioned Avenida Revolución, the *maquiladoras* and the poor slums surrounding the city. Instead, they call us to take into account its "Tijuana, Third Nation" artistic renaissance, the

---

[79] All translations from Spanish will be my own unless indicated.

city's quintessential claim to modernity, reterritorialization and hybridity (García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures* 239) as well as the solid literary contributions of *tijuanense* authors such as Federico Campbell and Luis Humberto Crosthwaite.[80] Nevertheless, these appeals to think of Tijuana as a prime location for (high) culture fail to address the idea that any analysis of Tijuana has to grapple with its contradictions, including those that pertain to its portrayals of women —women who are noticeably absent from playing a main role in the local cultural elite.

Finally, the matter of the representation of Tijuana's public women can even be studied as one of national identity. In order to do this, one would initially have to agree with Debra Castillo that in Mexico "presumed gender boundaries for women *and the transgression of these boundaries* are deeply embedded features of the social fabric" (*Easy Women* 3). At this point, considering iconic figures such as La Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe it is plain to see how crucial are both transgressive *and* well-behaved women to the Mexican imaginary. By extension, it could also explain why the portrayal of Tijuana as a whore is the one most attacked by the Mexican masculinized literary/cultural establishment: precisely because of the feelings of violation of national pride it inspires. In the "infamous" Tijuana, though, all of these depictions take on new meanings as women fight to represent themselves in diverse cultural products taking into consideration —not denying— their *public* images. By doing so, these and other texts struggle for an agency based on visibility, therefore taking on more well-known representations that intend to keep them as hidden as a dirty little secret.

---

[80] Source: <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/06/11/calendar/et-johnson11>

2.1 *Mujer que publica, mujer pública:* Rosina and Tijuana.[81]

"¡Camín, sir! ¡Camín, sir! ¡Biutiful señouruitas! [..] ¡Chou taim nau sir!"
(Conde, *En la Tarima* 47)[82]

Tijuana, even more than other Mexican border cities, appears to have invested heavily during the latter part of the 20th century in solving its public relations "issues." As a town with a reputation so notorious that the term "síndrome de Tijuana" was used to illustrate a cluster of stereotypes of illegality and sin related to the border region, it is not surprising that the local authorities have tried to focus on other aspects of the city that may better its reputation (Bustamante 303). This explains their concentration on its economic strength due to the 568 *maquiladoras* that operate in the city, as well as its slogan as "the most visited border in the world."[83] Nevertheless, the city of Tijuana and the women who are represented as public women there, still have a long way to go to "overcome" their *leyenda negra* of sexualization, marginality, invisibility and lack of voice.

It could be argued that this condition of gendered disparity is an important motivation behind the works of Rosina Conde, who has been exploring the inequality of women in Mexican society in her poetry, short stories and novels since the eighties. Now, while *la frontera* may not always appear explicitly in this diverse feminist literary corpus, it is fair to state that it is frequently and *phantasmatically* in the background.[84] However, in an attempt to focus only on

[81] A play on words: "Woman who publishes, public woman." Her own independent publishing house, Desliz Ediciones, has undertaken all of Rosina Conde's most recent publications.
[82] Conde jokingly writes the Spanish phonetics for the English calls heard at the entrances of bars at Avenida Revolución.
[83] Sources: <http://www.tijuana.gob.mx/> and <http://www.tijuana.gob.mx/ver_PDF.asp?filename=http://www.tijuana.gob.mx:80/dependencias/sedeti/pdf/Industrial_Septiembre_2007.pdf&titulo=>
[84] By "phantasmatic" I mean as a vague, undefined background presence.

texts where the geographical reference to Tijuana is unambiguous, I have chosen three of her short stories, namely, "Viñetas Revolucionarias," "Señora Nina" (in *En la Tarima*, 2001) and "¿Estudias o Trabajas?" (in *Arrieras Somos*, 1994), which, even in their brevity, manage to depict a complex picture of *tijuanense* women from all walks of life. In my analysis of the selected narratives I will concentrate on the protagonists' particular condition as *mujeres al borde* [women on the edge], that is, women whose social or economic circumstances have pushed them to discover the limits of their identities. Moreover, the common approach of these three stories that underlines the female characters' fluid interactions with their sexuality will be emphasized in contraposition to a patriarchal sexualization that attempts to undermine women's agency and stereotype feminine representations. In this sense, as Diana Palaversich suggests, Conde contributes to disarticulate the vision of Tijuana as a postmodern metropolis in order to present it as a city that suffers from the same sexism and classism that affects all of Mexican society (100). And while Conde's images of Tijuana may not be particularly flattering to its promoters, they definitively present nuanced feminine representations that go beyond the sensationalism or superficial depictions of Tijuana's women present in the texts of other local authors.

At this point, it would be appropriate to contextualize Conde's narrative in comparison with other better-known *tijuanense* literary figures. Here, Luis Alberto Urrea's *Across the Wire* (1993) and *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* (1996) are both examples of a crude gaze directed toward the denizens of the *dompes* [dumpsters] of Tijuana. The appalling conditions depicted from an "insider's" point of view appear to be especially highlighted when they involve the misery of *lumpen* women and little girls, thus following a path of female victimization

previously observed in *juarense* narratives.[85] Now, Urrea's accounts of absolute wretchedness are definitely not the norm in a mostly masculine literary landscape that proudly claims the border as its own.[86] Some authors attempt a more "lighthearted" approach instead. For instance, in Juan Villoro's story "Nothing to Declare: Welcome to Tijuana," the mythical border town is characterized "as a City of Vice for sinners on a budget" (198). In a bizarre academic tour, the male narrator visits Tijuana's high spots, presenting them almost as a freak show: the 56-foot statue of a naked woman (with her sculptor living inside her); *la línea,* ever poorer as it approaches the United States, and finally, the infamous strip clubs where voyeurs and visions of exotic dancers mingle in sordid surrealism. And yet, throughout these representations of Tijuana, there is a common feature to be observed in all the female characters that inhabit the stories of Urrea, Crosthwaite and Villoro: their prevalent lack of textual agency, manifested by their failure to occupy leading, speaking roles, thus being left with either victimized or stereotypically garish portrayals.

In comparison, that may well be the first distinctive attribute of Conde's "Viñetas Revolucionarias": that even though the textual scenario where they are placed is shady in a formulaic way —it is, after all, a strip club— the women characterized here are depicted in a more nuanced fashion by virtue of being protagonists in their own stories.[87] This narrative, then, arranged as a composite of feminine moments in eight individual vignettes, plays with the

---

[85] The author claims this position from having spent his formative years in the border and from doing years of missionary and social work in the *dompes*.

[86] Luis Humberto Crosthwaite is one of these authors who claim a close relationship with *la frontera* —as girlfriend, ex-wife— to the point that "There will be many more who will attempt to talk about her, trying to decipher her mysteries. I will be here, sleeping at her side, trying to be a better person for her" (241).

[87] This story was originally published in 1984 but I am including it in my time period because of the relevance of its subject matter and characterizations. It later appeared in Conde's most recent collection *En la Tarima* (2001).

readers' expectations beginning with its "revolutionary" name that cleverly alludes to the disreputable Avenida Revolución. The female protagonists here are thus presented as the ultimate "warriors" of this most sordid and well-recognized "battlefield" of the border (Castillo and Tabuenca 133); complete with the *noms de guerre* and performative identities they take on before their striptease numbers. Hence, "Viñetas Revolucionarias," arguably the most widely read of Conde's stories, takes Tijuana's most sinful street head on by subverting the patriarchal gaze in each of its vignettes, in a decidedly feminist role reversal between observers and observed. In other words, by portraying this particular textual location from the perspective of the stripper or the dancer or the prostitute, these sketches destabilize the readers' preconceptions of the male/female/transsexual players of Tijuana's underworld. It must be noted, though, that this simple textual act of privileging the point of view of the marginalized characters,

> combina, como todas las tácticas de resistencia, sumisión y aceptación del lugar asignado por el otro, con antagonismo y enfrentamiento, retiro de colaboración. [combines, like all other strategies of resistance, submission and acceptance of the place asigned by the other, with antagonism and confrontation, a withdrawal of collaboration] (Ludmer 51).

This "weapon of the weak," as well as other representational statagems used by Conde is quite paradoxical and even somewhat problematic in its nature and therefore must be used with caution.[88] And yet, it fits *la frontera* well in that it allows for a representation that comes from the margin to the center instead of viceversa.

In "Viñetas Revolucionarias," then, each character has the chance to briefly occupy the privileged position of a *subject* with agency, even within the confines of their objectified, sexualized roles. The first vignette introduces the reader to the paradoxically but aptly named

---

[88] I am borrowing the term "weapons of the weak" from Josefina Ludmer's well-known article by the same name (48).

Virgen, who unabashedly plays with the stereotypical binaries of innocence and perdition. Purposefully posing as “sexy e ingenua” [‘sexy and naïve’] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 36), Virgen seems to be completely *aware* of the double standards for women reflected on the expectations and desires of her admirers. Thus, this character can easily be placed in a cultural scenario where prostitutes and other “easy” women —in fact, all manners of *public* women— become interchangeable from one another and objectified, in contrast with the “decent” woman that must always be controlled lest she “loses” herself and “disgraces” the whole society (Castillo, *Easy Women* 12). And yet, Virgen embodies *both* the “loose” woman and the *ingenue*, in her own charming terms, which include her seemingly frivolous wish for slightly longer eyelashes as the guaranteed means to secure the success of her act of seduction, a textual move that informs the reader of Conde’s jocular and subversive style. However, Virgen’s “performative focus on her physical virginity [ultimately] estranges her sexuality” (Castillo and Tabuenca 134), which makes room for an interpretation of this vignette that counters an expected portrayal of the young woman as a sexualized victim. Therefore, as a result of Virgen’s awareness and conscious —if unsettling— manipulation of patriarchal double standards, this still marginal character is able to create an improbable narrative of feminist resistance by effectively alienating the same trait —her sexuality— that is most likely to be used for her objectification. She is able to accomplish this isolation of her sexualization by meticulously planning her onstage and offstage gendered performance as “sensualmente bella” [‘sensually beautiful’], simultaneously playing into *and* challenging patriarchal stereotypes (Conde, *En la Tarima* 35).

The second stripper of “Viñetas Revolucionarias,” the exoticized Lyn Su, plays with another familiar masculinist stereotype in her transformation from Oriental “goddess” to tropical, *ardent* “reina de la rumba” [‘queen of the rumba’] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 37). Several meaningful

details may escape an initial reading of this short piece, starting with the fact that it is only when the performer becomes "Latinized" that the men who are watching her respond in earnest. Considering as well that her spectators are described as "desperate" *marines*, the response of both audience and dancer is not only performative à la Judith Butler but geopolitical as well.[89] In other words, Lyn Su's sketch prefigures Tijuana in a concealed fashion as both feminine and Mexican —and therefore susceptible of being *possessed* by the Anglo other. In this vignette, though, the subtle but unexpected twist comes when the fiery *femme fatale* seems more entranced in her own response to the music than in her audience's fervent calls. By abandoning the stage and leaving the frustrated marines dejected, the text allows the stripper to claim certain agency, managing to somewhat subvert the voyeuristic spectacle by giving priority to her own feminine sensual pleasure over the male objectification she is being subjected to.

Zoraida, the third act of the night, performs the part of the sensuous and godlike cat to the adoring and terrified mouse of a teenager egged on by his friends. Here, the terms used to describe the participants of this ritual bespeak of the quasi-religious nature of their interaction: the "initiate" and the "priestess," the "nymph" and the "hieratic" (Conde, *En la Tarima* 38). Moreover, these appellations charge the encounter with a more positive connotation than can usually be expected from a masculine perspective.[90] The seduction game has a sudden end when

---

[89] Both the masculine reaction and the feminine performance in this vignette can be thought of in reference to Butler's performativity of gender roles: the former from the "naturalized" perspective of how men "should" react to female displays of sexuality and the latter precisely as the playful subversion of these gendered standards (44).

[90] As an example of a more stereotypical representation of a strip club, we can turn to José Manuel Valenzuela Arce's short story "Ritos de Iniciación": "Acorde con la sordidez del lugar, una mujer regordeta se contoneaba desnuda en un empobrecido y oscuro escenario. La escasa luz y las tonalidades rojas pero, sobre todo, su desinhibida desnudez, la hacían parecer atractiva." ["In accordance with the sordidness of the place, a buxom woman contorted naked on a poor and dark stage. The dim light and the red shades, but, above all, her uninhibited nakedness, made her

the boy, after having been led to the make-believe bed onstage, runs away in shame "en busca de las luces de la avenida Revolución" ['in search of the lights of Revolución avenue'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 39). By doing so, the chauvinist expectations for these kinds of sexual initiations are suddenly inverted, as the young man is placed in a subordinate position and retreats from what patriarchal standards would assume to be an "easy conquest." In addition, it is rather notable that when the adolescent escapes the *enchantress*, he does so by seeking the street and the light, confirming that public spaces are considered a masculine domain but also subverting their symbolism, as they are stripped of their "power" by becoming a refuge for the boy. Thus, in the end the vignette provides us with another performative display of feminine empowerment in an unlikely situation, simply by placing the female character "on top."

The next sketch, located away from the glare of the stage, fittingly offers a more intimate tone. The scene opens with the dejected Mariela hiding her amorous disappointment in the meticulous care invested in her makeup before going onstage, as a reflection of her intractable yet momentary transformation into an arrogant temptress. Every move is painstakingly executed, revealing a will that even encompasses her timely surrender to her drug of choice, the cocaine artfully hidden (where else?) in her malachite makeup case. In this, one of the most problematic sections of "Viñetas Revolucionarias," two feminine stereotypes ―the abandoned woman and the addicted stripper― collide in the symbolic representation of the double-sided malachite box (Castillo and Tabuenca 136). And yet, there is an uncanny textual emphasis placed in Mariela's ability to *choose* between the makeup and the drug. While this may not be enough to qualify as feminine agency, it can certainly be considered a step above the stereotype of absolute vice and/or helplessness supposedly embodied by some "public women." In any case, the story of

---

seem attractive."] (*Tecateando el Recuerdo* 148). Here, the stripper is no goddess and has no real powers of seduction to speak of, in stark contrast to Conde's divas.

Mariela is a good example of how Conde's texts do not romanticize or overdramatize her subjects, even if they are placed in a literary scenario that continuously reflects on a degraded reality.

There is quite a shift, then, when the fifth performer, la Darling, is purposefully represented as the most magical and mysterious enchantress featured in "Viñetas Revolucionarias." Hers is a hyperbole of shaking feathers that both hides and ultimately discloses her true condition as a transvestite, but not before she has successfully trumped the macho display of the "hapless" man that had dared to kiss her onstage. The entirety of this vignette, then, falls cleverly into Judith Butler's insights on the subversive nature of drag, as it ridicules the notion of a true generic identity, and at the same time it "*reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*" (175). It follows that there seems to be no better place to test the falseness of presumably "natural" gender-specific representations than the strip club of Conde's text. Besides, the conclusion of la Darling's story presents, in a way, the revenge of the abject subject, a performative subversion of patriarchal sexual paradigms and fantasies. Finally, the powerful representation of the protagonist of this vignette serves to contradict the assumption that a subject would necessarily occupy a space of marginality merely by *crossing* over into a female identity or identification.

Keeping with the subjacent theme of transformation-through-appearances present in "Viñetas Revolucionarias," the last vignette nonetheless differs from the rest because it offers a more realistic, but also cruder, portrayal of this one-street-long *tijuanense* world show. Here, the pregnant Zarina is literally sick of it all: of her craving for potato chips, of her exploitative boss and his subservient bartender, of her life as a hooker and a stripteaser. But much like her more glitzy companions, Zarina has enough spunk to try and use her current circumstances of

exploitation for her own benefit. Tempted by the playful bickering of an appreciative cowboy and his "in god we trust" (Conde, *En la Tarima* 45), and in the hope of forgetting her existential nausea, she blithely agrees to be carried off to one of the dance hall/brothel's rooms. And while this ending may refer the reader to Tijuana's association with a perceived "abnormal" female sexuality that keeps to its "Black Legend" (Castillo et. al. 242), it can also be noted that within a patriarchal context, the only accepted aspect of women's sexuality is the procreative one. Thus, the vignette's brief allusion to Zarina's motherhood works very well to formulate a feminist critique of the cultural imaginary of Mexican society, where the "monstrous doubles" of the [Virgin] mother and the whore are so pervasive.[91] Zarina, then, becomes immediately doubly subversive simply by embodying both of these icons and thus, her character, while firmly immersed in the margins, still manages to simultaneously personify and challenge the conflictive representations of the "public women" of Tijuana. Furthermore, the last one of Conde's "Viñetas" appears to support "the image of the prostitute as agent, who willingly chooses her occupation"; therefore the text positions itself against the most common views on prostitution, who either view prostitutes as "fallen wom[e]n, whose personal pathology […] led inevitably to life as a prostitute […] or as victim[s]" (Doezema 38). By departing from both of these conventional conceptions of "public women," Conde's text manages to portray Zarina as performing her identity with a certain degree of agency.

The harsh world represented in the last vignette contrasts heavily with the epilogue of "Viñetas," where the reader witnesses the voyeuristic fantasy created by the announcers at the

---

[91] "In the complexities of national myth, the [Mexican] nation is both mother and whore" (Castillo, *Easy Women* 20). This assertion clearly alludes to the figure of La Malinche as a metaphoric mother of Mexicans, as well as to her representation as the ultimate "easy woman" because of her alleged liaison with the Spaniard Cortés. In the case of Zarina, her double portrayal as mother and prostitute is definitely more literal.

entrance of the clubs, a carnivalesque scenario where “vírgenes en potencia o fabricadas” [‘potential or fabricated virgins’] are the apple of temptation in this aptly named “paraíso revolucionario” [‘revolutionary paradise’] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 47).[92] Quite appropriately, then, the exchange between the opposing archetypes of Mary and Eve is based in these vignettes on a “staging of sexuality rather than the fact of it” (Castillo and Tabuenca 134). Therefore, the issue of performativity becomes central in the analysis of these representations of the most sexualized of border women.

On a slightly different note, Vaquera and Castillo have pointed out that the men in “Viñetas Revolucionarias” are presented as a homogenous voyeuristic mass, while the individuality of each female character is highlighted in Conde’s vignettes. This inversion is significant, as it could be argued that all the other popular visions of Tijuana via Avenida Revolución are based on presenting a male-dominated spectacle where the objectification and marginalization of the women on stage depend on individual female subjects being *indistinguishable* from one another in a lumpen class of sorts. In Conde’s text, the power of the gaze is thus transmuted from collective men (“los marines,” “los adolescentes") to particularized, named, *public* women.

Albeit all its radical twists, it is undeniable that “Viñetas Revolucionarias” also portrays the ultimate Tijuana of *gringo* and central Mexico fantasy. Because of this, the bar(s) where the different characters work could be easily imagined as an extension of the whole city: a place where the prostitute has a well-established —if extremely tarnished— societal role. This position of the harlot was once defined as both a sewer for the social body as well as an agent of

[92] This epithet appears to be an allusion to Avenida Revolución.

contamination (Corbin 211-213).[93] And while there is still a shadow of this maligned function in the sickened reactions to Zoraida and la Darling, along with Zarina's own pregnant queasiness, this notion of the prostitute is reframed in Conde's text to some extent. This refashioning of the female denizens of Avenida Revolución is mostly accomplished by textually focusing on their active role in (re)creating themselves within the context of fantasy and illusion. Even as it could be argued that this situation places the prostitutes/dance girls of Conde's vignettes squarely within patriarchal expectations for "easy women," this line of reasoning would fail to consider a paradoxical element in the textual reappropriation of their marginality: the fact that ironically, by *opting to perform* masculine desire onstage, these public women become *visible* in their own terms. Thus, the power of feminine choice shared to some extent by all the characters of "Viñetas Revolucionarias" functions as a veritable "weapon of the weak" which operates to contest patriarchy's mechanisms of objectification and sexualization.

In Rosina Conde's fictional constructions, patriarchal attempts at keeping women marginalized are not limited to prostitutes or table dancers. "Señora Nina" (originally in *Embotellado de Origen,* 1994) is a short story that undertakes the life of a working-class woman of Tijuana by relating a tale of exploitation and its subsequent turnaround in one of the businesses more traditionally associated with the border, the clothing industry.[94] This narration of the exchanges between an abusive costume designer and his seamstress has been, unfortunately, rather overlooked by critics of border literature.

---

[93] In 19th century France, the prostitute or *putain* embodied both the refuse of society due to her supposedly "putrid body" and a way to dispose of the filth associated with certain bodily needs by placing them into this same body (Corbin 211-213).

[94] "Señora Nina" resonates with the same themes of the exploitation of female workers and their gradual overcoming of these conditions due to their increased awareness that *Maquilápolis* brings out from the perspective of the non-fiction documentary.

In a subtle yet acerbic dialogue with Tijuana's —and by extension, with Mexico's— cultural establishment, this text begins by addressing the despotic articulation of both femininity and the acting profession by those who are "in charge": in this case, Ron, a fairly hysterical male *costumier*. The figure of the man in this superior standing in opposition to a female "underling" is not fortuitous at all, as it mirrors the predominance of male "artists" (writers, painters, movie directors) over women in subordinate positions (muses, models, actresses). This is one of the many oblique references to a sharp cultural and feminist critique that the careful reader may encounter in this short story. Thus, when the snobbish Ron proclaims "¡La estética está por encima de todo! ¡La comodidad nunca se toma en cuenta en estos casos!" ['Aesthetics are above everything! Comfort is never considered in these cases!'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 109) to Nina, his very practical dressmaker, the multipronged irony is quite patent. For on the one hand, Ron is not only foreshadowing his disregard for Nina's well-being for the sake of his "artistic ideals," but the text also makes an ingenious meta-commentary on the prevalent criticisms leveled against many women writers by the Latin American literary academia due to a perceived "superficiality" and lack of "hard-core" aesthetic value in their work.

Other, more radical feminist pronunciations are written in the transformation of the main character of "Señora Nina": from a meek and somewhat pitiful single mother in the beginning of the text, to a dignified and outspoken woman at the end, completely conscious of the value of her own work, as well as of the ineptitude and insecurities of her erstwhile tyrannical boss. One important way this makeover is portrayed is through language, more specifically, in the ways in which the characters talk to each other. Hence, when the story begins, Nina only addresses Ron with the formal "usted" and is categorically obsequious with phrases such as: "Me da gusto complacerlo, señor" ['I am glad to please you, sir'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 110). By means of a

heavy reliance on dialogue and monologue that make the text fairly theatrical, "Señora Nina" gradually hints at the protagonist's changeover and empowerment via the subtle changes and minute rebellions ciphered in her speech. In fact, one of the earliest signs of Nina's "insubordinate" nature is her insistence in addressing Ron's girlfriend, Catalina, as "señora," instead of "señorita," much to her boss's displeasure: "Nina, ¿cuántas veces te tengo que decir que a mi novia no le digas "señora"?" ['Nina, how many times do I have to tell you not to call my girlfriend "señora"?] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 128)[95] This irritation is easily explained by the designer's very patriarchal view of women, in which the sexuality of his partner must be denied at all costs in order to keep the virgin/whore binary intact. Additionally, this seemingly archaic linguistic distinction alludes to Ron's desire to maintain an entrenched class differentiation between Nina and Catalina, based on the strict sexual mores that *gente decente* are supposed to keep up.[96]

However, there are other sexist notions that Ron holds about women that do not distinguish between their social statuses, namely his repeated allegations concerning their so-called manipulative nature and his constant insinuations belittling their intellect. For if Ron continuously portrays himself as the true "creative genius" and demeans Nina by making her appear dumb before him, this does not spare Catalina from receiving a similar treatment: "Pero si ya sabemos que tú nunca piensas, mi vida" ['But if we already know that you never think, my love'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 119). Statements such as this underscore the notion that Ron's clout

---

[95] The term "señora" acknowledges that a woman is no longer a virgin, usually because she is married. Since Ron and Catalina are not married, the use of "señora" entails that they are having sexual relations. "Señorita" is used to address young women, implying their virginity.
[96] The epithet "gente decente" literally means "decent people," but it refers to the "beautiful people" or the upper class.

over Nina and Catalina is firstly based on his success at characterizing them as mentally inferior —a traditional patriarchal strategy for stereotyping and controlling women.

Ron's second strategy to dominate the women in his life is through money. While he seems to shower Catalina with it in order to keep her beholden to him, with Nina he uses the opposite tactic, as he frequently defaults in paying her salary. One of his "rationalizations" for failing to be a trustworthy boss veils Ron's sexist belief that women have no real need or ability to support a family: "Pero si tú eres mujer, Nina, ¿para qué necesitas dinero?" ['But, you are a woman, Nina, what do you need the money for?'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 113) And while this is obviously an unfounded excuse, it clearly resonates with similar patriarchal arguments encountered in Juárez, as they replicate the "public woman" stigma that attempts to maintain women within the realm of domesticity, castigating those that overstep these boundaries.[97] Ironically, this reasoning does not prevent Ron from criticizing Nina for failing to fully provide for her sick child:

> Si yo fuera tú, ya me habría ido a una esquina o habría hecho cualquier cosa; pero ya hubiera llevado a mi hijo al médico. [If I were you, I would have gone to a corner (a euphemism for working as a prostitute) or I would have done anything; but I would have already taken my son to the doctor] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 114).

The fact that it is Ron's very exploitation of his seamstress (due to the long hours and lack of timely payments) that impinges on the fulfillment of her maternal duties is obviously lost on this petty tyrant. Moreover, the derogatory nature of this comment yet again is reminiscent of the paradoxical representation of workingwomen as "public" and therefore, easily sexualized.

---

[97] An undercurrent of this patriarchal contention —that women who work outside their home are "corrupt, public women"— can be noticed as part of the cultural struggle that Mexican female workers have to face when they aspire to represent themselves in venues such as the documentary *Maquilápolis*.

Considering Ron's insulting treatment of his employee, it is even more outrageous to realize that within this exploitative work environment, this boss seemingly believes that by promising her recognition in the local media, he will be able to compensate for his abuse. Nina, however, is entirely aware of the worthlessness of the offer: "¿De qué me sirve a mí salir en todos los periódicos, si mi hijo y yo nos estamos muriendo de hambre?" ['What is the use of me appearing in all the newspapers if my son and I are starving?'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 118) Nevertheless, it is rather significant to note that when the *costumier* offers his employee free passes to the play's opening night at Tijuana's cultural center CECUT, as well as the opportunity to meet the city's writers and cultural personalities, Nina starts to completely come to terms with just how valuable her work and her creative input really are.[98]

In the end, though, Nina's full recognition of her own worth —and her empowering transformation— are precipitated by her discovery of Ron's lies to her. In fact, it is precisely Ron's shallowness and love for glitter and partying across the border (namely, in San Diego) which ultimately open Nina's eyes to his mistreatment of her: "¡así que se fueron a bailar y a mí me dijo que estuvo trabajando toda la noche!" ['so they went dancing and he told me he had been working all night!'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 136) While it is somewhat complicated to determine if the seamstress's resentment is solely provoked by the evident class divide shown by Ron's frivolous dancing or if she actually feels sentimentally betrayed by him, the fact is that, for Nina, this is the final straw. Her realization fortuitously coincides with the rapidly approaching deadline for Ron's mishandled labor commitments, which gives her increasing leverage to

[98] The city's cultural center is the pride of its artistic community. It is somewhat curious that Ignacio Flores de la Lama, Edward Coward, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite and Regina Swain are the only names mentioned in this brief reference to who's who in Tijuana's cultural milieu (Conde, *En la Tarima* 125).

swiftly improve her work conditions and discard her previous obsequiousness towards both the designer and his exasperating girlfriend.

While considering the issue of increased feminine assertiveness through the representation of this particular subaltern woman, it must be noted that "Señora Nina" displays a character that always has the *potential* for overcoming the patriarchal and class-related ties that initially bind her. Nina's capability for this rebellion of sorts is centered firstly on an internal factor: her constant —if veiled— awareness of the value of her creativity, work skills and rights. Nevertheless, it is only in the last part of this short story when the protagonist is able to stand up for herself and implement her own decisions: "Usted dijo, señor, pero yo nunca acepté lo que usted dijo, además, el modelo es mío" ['You said so, sir, but I never accepted what you said; besides, the model is mine" (Conde, *En la Tarima* 141). This remarkable turnaround from the formerly exploited, submissive employee demonstrates an additional appropriation of her *labor* as a source of feminist empowerment in opposition to Ron's patriarchally-based abuse as an employer.

Ultimately, the reader witnesses a complete reversal of roles in which Nina's radical metamorphosis is significantly marked by her now very deliberate takeover of *language*. Ron's shock over Nina's "new" words is immense: "¿Qué, cómo te atreves a hablarme así? ¿Desde cuándo los patos le tiran a las escopetas?" ['What, how dare you speak to me like that? Since when do ducks fire at shotguns?'] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 151)[99] And yet, Nina does not stop here: from mockingly replicating Ron's lecturing on proper theatrical terms to using the informal "tú" and insisting in being respectfully addressed as "Señora Nina," the once subservient woman completes her whimpering boss' humiliation by walking out on him after forcing him to pay her

[99] This quaint colloquial expression is common in Mexico and it obviously implies the speaker's surprise over a turnaround in hierarchical positions.

a considerable portion of her salary.[100] But Ron's predicament is still not over, for when Catalina discovers that without Nina her boyfriend has been reduced to a sniveling fool and —most importantly— will be completely unable to pay for her dream wedding, she promptly and unceremoniously dumps him as well.

Now, possibly the most important feminist lesson to be learned from "Señora Nina" is that the metaphorical emasculation of Ron is significantly brought about by the attainment of Nina's economic independence, which leads the story into an even greater inversion in the expected gendered positions of the characters.[101] This can be illustrated with the following dialogue between Ron and Nina:

—Señora Nina, no se vaya, por favor, ¡se lo suplico!

—Ni creas que me vas a doblegar con tus lágrimas.

[—Mrs. Nina, please don't leave, I beg you!

—Don't even think you will persuade me with your tears] (Conde, *En la Tarima* 154).

Once more emphasizing the performativity of gender, Conde's story veritably turns the tables of power by having Nina *seize* the "masculine" stance in opposition to Ron's weepy pleas. And while some have suggested that Conde's straight-forward style of feminism (as epitomized in this story) is decidedly *passé*, it must be remembered as well that when it comes to male *fronterizo* authors, a converse accusation of "masculinism" is not applied, as they have not been really censured for portraying a mostly male, homosocial world in their texts (Palaversich 121).

---

[100] The use of the address "Señora Nina" as a key factor that reveals the protagonist's rise in status in the story is foreshadowed by the title of Conde's text.

[101] Not all of Conde's stories have this liberating finale for their female characters. In "Gaviota," thus, it is made quite clear that because *maquiladoras* do not take women with children, the protagonist must lead a nomadic and starving existence trying to find a place for her and her child.

Moreover, critics of Conde's more direct and strident feminist approach should also consider that her stories never "essentialize" *all* women in an epic struggle against men but that her texts always bear in mind nuances of portrayal that bespeak a globalized border scenario where her characters interact accordingly.

These gendered textual considerations are narrated from a different socioeconomic perspective in "¿Estudias o Trabajas?," a story that is part of the compilation *Arrieras Somos* (1994).[102] Here, the concentration is on the *tijuanense* middle class, showing how, in this specific border context, patriarchal double standards apply to women from diverse societal backgrounds. This story, which is constructed as a very sarcastic monologue, deals with the sexualization and supposed materialism of women in Mexican and, particularly, *tijuanense* society, as well as with how these sexist representations may be textually subverted by an astute female character. In a gossipy and familiar tone, María Elena, the narrator of "¿Estudias o Trabajas?" mixes her own story with Tijuana's, reproducing a somewhat parallel "downfall." In this case, just like the protagonist is "forced" to go from "hija de familia" to pretending she is a bimbo in order to maintain her cherished standard of living; Tijuana, once known as "la Ciudad de los Perfumes" ['the City of Perfumes'], ends up irrevocably posing as *maquiladora* and party heaven (Conde, *Arrieras Somos* 19).[103]

But more than an uncomplicated allegory with Tijuana, the protagonist's tale in "¿Estudias o Trabajas?" presents important annotations on the subject of women's interactions and negotiations with men within the framework of patriarchal efforts to control female

---

[102] "Do you work or do you study?" is a trite pick up line/conversation starter. *Arrieras Somos* has been translated as *Women on the Road.*
[103] The epithet "hija de familia" is commonly used to signify a daughter from the Mexican middle or upper class, with no "need" to work as she is supported by her family.

sexuality. Yet again, the figure of the "public woman" appears in the main character in a story filled with Conde's characteristic "slipperiness of terms and positionalities" (Castillo and Tabuenca 148). Indeed, as she converses with the reader, María Elena maneuvers —tongue-in-cheek— between different positions and identifications that go from advocating equal sexual freedom for both men and women to complying with men's supposedly genuine desire to relate to easily manipulated women.

At the beginning of the story, though, the protagonist is yet to realize that the men in her life are bound to put forward all sorts of arguments in order to control her sexuality to their own convenience. In fact, "¿Estudias o Trabajas?" can be read as a cautionary tale demonstrating how the running of a woman's sexual life can be attempted even through the manipulation of feminist ideals such as women's liberation. This is exactly what both Antonio, the protagonist's boyfriend, and Miguel Ángel, her pimp-like boss, are trying to do by talking to María Elena about women's liberation from completely different perspectives. For the scheming Miguel Ángel —a swindling *maquiladora* entrepreneur— the perfect sales pitch to secure the interest and availability of his then naïve employee is the offer of a modeling gig in San Diego, the perfect career opportunity for such a "dynamic" and "*sexy*" (read "liberated") woman as María Elena (Conde, *Arrieras Somos* 21).[104] Now, for the conservative Antonio, the idea of his girlfriend becoming a model in San Diego is almost as bad as her working as a prostitute. Ironically, Antonio's reasoning is that models are the antithesis of the liberated woman because of their objectification, aside from representing the most terrible capitalist use of the female body. This last contention is the tipping point for the perceptive María Elena, who realizes that her old-fashioned boyfriend —the son of a jeweler, after all— is hypocritically brandishing these

[104] In Mexico, even now, a "liberated" woman is popularly understood as sexually available, "public."

assertions only to stop her from entering a "questionable" profession. Her insight is confirmed after she actually goes to a "tryout" in San Diego: for when Antonio finds out, he accuses her of sleeping around and of using the modeling work as an excuse for "whoring" (Conde, *Arrieras Somos* 23).

Here, the perception of San Diego as a "place of perdition," in a blatant role reversal with the stereotypes about Tijuana, deserves a moment of consideration as it is suggested in "Señora Nina" as well and it plays into the "North of the Borderism" label of debauchery by association to the United States.[105] In the end, without even having worked in the "sinful" San Diego, María Elena is left with no boyfriend and no modeling job, for Miguel Ángel decides she is too emotionally immature for that line of work and promptly entangles her in his shady *maquiladora* business, where he manipulates her into "going out" with his business associates so as to expedite his commercial transactions.

Ultimately, though, the feminist commentary written into "¿Estudias o Trabajas?" is less centered in decrying how the protagonist is duped into acting as a high-end sexual facilitator of sorts and more concerned with detailing the progression of María Elena's personal realizations with respect to heterosexual relationships. In fact, the protagonist, jaded and disenchanted, doesn't take too long to understand that, within this framework, it is men who have the upper hand in influencing women:

> mientras te manipulan ideológicamente para que les sueltes todo lo que ellos necesitan —mientras te necesitan—, […] te chupan el tiempo, y el cuerpo, y las ideas y el amor y la nostalgia y los recuerdos y tus anhelos, y te lavan el coco. […] Y nomás te chupan y te chupan sin darte nada a cambio. ['while they manipulate you ideologically so that you

[105] As a brief aside, it is somewhat interesting that, at least in Conde's work, San Diego is mentioned as a cultural referent much more often than El Paso in most *juarense* narratives.

> give them all they need —while they need you—, […] they suck out your time, and your body, and your ideas and your love and your nostalgia and your memories and your dreams, and they brainwash you. […] And they just suck you out and suck you out without giving you anything in return'] (Conde, *Arrieras Somos* 23).

This plainly vampiric vision of men is evidently based on the underlying assumption that in a patriarchal environment, women are easy prey to men's manipulations. However, it goes beyond a standard feminist complaint in that it acknowledges that women's physical, intellectual and emotional attributes are highly desired "prizes" in this battle of the sexes. Thus, it is rather surprising that instead of advocating for a direct confrontation with a full awareness of one's self-worth —like Nina does in the previous story— the protagonist of "¿Estudias o Trabajas?" takes a more covert approach to contesting this unfair situation. In particular, María Elena ironically concludes that rather than expecting emotional or material reciprocity from men in a scenario where women are exclusively represented and exploited as givers, feminine strategy should consist of concealing their most "wanted" attributes. Therefore, María Elena's closing advice for women is that they should never let men know that they are (sexually) liberated or economically independent or even intelligent if they are to expect any (financial) retribution from them (Conde, *Arrieras Somos* 27). And with this ending in which women try to beat men at their own power game, the story perversely shows a controversial redeployment of patriarchal standards, allowing "women […] to use men's strategies and expectations against them, even though in highly problematic terms" (Castillo and Tabuenca 142). Indeed, independently of whether one considers the femininity displayed in this story as helpless (co-opted into the patriarchal system) or strangely self-reliant (*playing* the system), it undeniably presents a

complex take on both feminist and patriarchal tenets from Conde's unique and highly satirical perspective.[106]

An observation that may arise from the examination of these three stories grounded in Tijuana is that the reader arrives to an understanding of the border via an imaginary that highlights *women on the edge* —a main thematic focus of Conde's texts. Concurrently, Castillo and Tabuenca argue that this author's "corrosive attention to marginality as essence, shell, or disguise" (147) is one of her narrative's distinguishing features. This concentration on the marginalized can also be interpreted as the basis for the positioning of women as main characters in Conde's stories, considering that by making them the protagonists of her fiction, their outcast roles may be —textually— reversed. Furthermore, the centrality of these *mujeres en el borde(r)* in Conde's texts also functions as an allegory of the situation of their city, the much-slighted Tijuana. For, on the one hand, this border city's reputation, much like the representation of its "public women" is a well-known secret, but one sufficiently tainted that it must be kept on the margins and hushed. On the other hand, the performativity of Conde's female characters appears replicated in the conceptualization of Tijuana as a palimpsest, "una ciudad cubierta de texto que invita al participante o al lector entrar (sic) y participar en el gran show de la frontera" ['A city covered by text that invites the participant or the reader enter (sic) and participate in the great show of the border'] (Vaquera 30).[107] And while this outlook may still bear a patriarchal connotation of the *insertion* of the outsiders' views into a feminized urban space, they can also be read as a suggestion of the subversive and unsettling power of *performance*. What makes

[106] In this respect, both of Conde's novels *La Genara* (1998) and *Como Cashora al Sol* (2007) share with the analyzed story a concentration on the world of middle-class *tijuanense* women, in terms of patriarchal restrictions and ways to overcome them.
[107] The much celebrated border writer Regina Swain shares an apocalyptic/magical realism vision of Tijuana in some stories included in *La Señorita Supermán y Otras danzas* (1993).

Conde's stories distinctive is that they allow for both their female characters and their symbolic Tijuana to showcase and perform *themselves* in a demonstration of representational "agency from-the-margins" still rare in this part of the border. It is precisely this marginalized vantage point which is undisputedly shared by the determined women activists that inhabit the world of *Maquilápolis*, even if their concerns, as depicted in the film, focus more on confronting marginality by tackling the effects of globalization than of patriarchy in their daily lives. In the following analysis of this documentary, a different vision of *tijuanense* women speaking for themselves will thus be evaluated, a vision that, while straying from Conde's underlying feminist discussions, is categorically inspired by personal and *public* female interactions with globalized marginalization in Tijuana.

2.2 Tijuana or *Maquilápolis*?: Between the private and the public *woman.*

"Tijuana no es basurero de nadie." ['Tijuana is nobody's trashcan.']
Lourdes Luján, *Maquilápolis*[108]

Despite being amongst the first Mexican border cities to participate in the *maquiladora* industrialization program, this may not be the *initial* association that appears when considering the image and landscape of Tijuana. The city's popular connection with a particularly gaudy variety of tourism is probably why the industrial side of Tijuana does not immediately come to mind in its overall representation, apart from the fact that the manufacturing complexes of the city are typically far away from the city's lively and well-known downtown. All of this reinforces a certain quality of invisibility of the working class women of Tijuana: they are, quite simply, not a salient part of the city's imaginary, which appears to be more fascinated with the titillation and sexualization surrounding the women linked to Avenida Revolución.[109]

Therefore, when the women who work in Tijuana's *maquiladoras* are actually portrayed, it is not surprising that the figure of the *public woman* lingers persistently in the background. Within the Mexican cultural context, this "apparition" in turn triggers the presence of a private/public dichotomy in the depictions of female *maquiladora* workers, including those infrequent cases where these workingwomen contribute to represent themselves. The documentary *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (2006), which strives to create spaces for these uncommon instances of self-representation, thus serves as an effective illustration of the complexities of these feminine portrayals in the context of Tijuana's *maquiladoras.* This

---

[108] I will mostly use the film's translations into English.

[109] This sexualized portrayal of women is, of course, the most common one in film, as can be seen in the host of Tijuana-inspired B-movies such as *Tijuana Makes me Happy* (2005), *Cruce en Tijuana* (1995) or *De Michoacán a Tijuana* (2005), heirs of the downfall of quality Mexican cinema in the seventies.

explains the reasoning behind the selection of this film, as it is meant to exemplify —from a *peripheral* viewpoint— a different perspective of *tijuanense* women in their multiple avatars as workers, mothers, activists and committed citizens of their communities. A brief summary of this documentary must then highlight that its female protagonists have as one of their main concerns the fight for environmental issues that have deeply affected them and their surroundings, apart from the more unequivocal goal of resisting the exploitative conditions inherent to the *maquiladora* industrial system. In the subsequent analysis of *Maquilápolis*, I will explore the intricacies of the balancing act these women make between their public personas —characterized by their work and their activism— and their private personas, distinguished by their allegiance to their impoverished border communities and by their domestic preoccupations, which stress their roles as mothers from an atypical, non-patriarchal standpoint.[110]

It is precisely the distinctiveness of the *private* world of the *tijuanense* women portrayed in *Maquilápolis* that may well be the most significant difference with other representations of Tijuana's working women, particularly in comparison with Conde's previously examined texts. Thus, while the private sphere of Conde's female characters is in constant negotiation and confrontation with patriarchally-established images of women that revolve —in one way or another— around their sexuality, the female protagonists of *Maquilápolis* basically obviate these sexual considerations in the depiction of their private lives.[111] And yet, even though sexuality is not considered as being an identity-defining factor for the women who are the focus of

[110] By an 'atypical' motherhood I mean that the women portrayed here are not passive in any way or dependent on men to achieve their very public objectives of bettering their living conditions.

[111] Another important difference between these texts is based on their divergent approaches to the city itself: while Conde's female characters *perform* Tijuana, the women in *Maquilápolis* appropriate this border town by standing up for it.

Maquilápolis, this does not mean that their private personas are completely devoid of traditional roles. On the contrary, the conventionally expected "duties" as mothers and as anchors of their communities are very much present in this documentary. However, these feminine functions are portrayed here with a twist, which can be attributed unequivocally to the film's reformulation of the feminist tenet "the personal is political." Consequently, the women depicted in *Maquilápolis* make a case for domesticity and for the unity of their localities by linking these "feminine" values to their very *public* denunciation of the work exploitation prevalent in Tijuana's *maquiladoras*, as well as to their environmentally-oriented activism. The fact that these women make their arguments *as* public women —in the sense of speaking out in public— but without the negative and sexualized images associated to this depiction in the media, is relevant because it reaffirms the possibility of a non-patriarchal femininity within a borderlands context.

This appropriation of the "public woman" persona is but one of several particularities of *Maquilápolis* that contributes to its uniqueness as a subject of study. The film's concentration on this very current topic of environmental struggles is another.[112] Arguably, though, it is the appropriately strident Tijuana-style of ecological and labor activism depicted in the film that makes the characterization of these grassroots activists truly uncommon among most border representations of Mexican women. For instance, when compared with the activists portrayed in *La Batalla de las Cruces*, the women in *Maquilápolis* do share the same commitment and effort placed into a cause that for them and for their families is also one of life and death, but their perspectives towards their respective *battles* could not be more different. That is, while the

---

[112] While infrequent in border texts, the thematic treatment of the environmental dangers caused by industrial waste is not exclusive to *Maquilápolis.* Rosina Conde's performance "Señorita Maquiladora" (1996) also concentrates on the dangers to personal health and to the environment at large derived from labor in the *maquiladora* industry. Source: http://www.rosinaconde.com.mx/mm.htm.

advocates in *La Batalla de las Cruces* must additionally contend in some way or another with the victimization of women prevalent in the Juárez context, the female protagonists of *Maquilápolis* are not weighed down by such added "image wars." Thus, they display a noticeably more assertive stance that does not allow room for victimization.

One of the explanations that may account for the characteristic boldness of the women in *Maquilápolis* is the fact that they actively participated in their own filmic construction. Actually, according to the film's website, this collaborative aspect was central to the intent of producers and directors Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre.

> Over a six-week period the producers of MAQUILAPOLIS conducted a video workshop in Tijuana, training a group of *promotoras* (community activists) to use digital video cameras. […] The factory workers who appear in the film have been involved in every stage of production, from planning to shooting, from scripting to outreach. […] It merges artmaking (sic) with community development to ensure that the film's voice will be truly that of its subjects.[113]

Yet, the spirit of partnership directed towards the women who are at the center of *Maquilápolis* can also be interpreted as a quite deliberate move from the filmmakers, who by affirming this collaboration then position themselves within the context of binational activism. Furthermore, these assertions that portray *Maquilápolis* as a joint venture between directors and subjects position the film, from its inception, as a means to reach across an important national, educational and class divide. This may explain the documentary's insistence on showing the commitment of the producers to giving the *promotoras* ample use of this representational space. In fact, the first example of this creative synergy corresponds to the opening shots of the

---

[113] Source: http://www.maquilapolis.com

documentary, which are credited to Carmen, one of *Maquilápolis*' amateur filmmakers, who turns the camera on herself and on her coworkers in a plastics factory. This scene serves to immediately introduce the viewer to the film's main overall objective: the critical analysis —from the female workers' perspective— of the effects of the *maquiladoras* in their daily lives. Here, it is important to note that this explicit goal of *Maquilápolis* is consistent with a greater appreciation, within the culture of documentary film, of "subjectivity, a grounding in the personal and the experiential, [as a way to fuel] the engine of political action" (Renov, "New Subjectivities" 89). This trend towards a more prominent role of subjectivity as a staple of politically-involved documentaries is detectable in *Maquilápolis* from beginning to end, as it also plays a part in reiterating the message of teamwork between the women in the film and its directors, as recapped even in an insert title before the final credits.[114] Now, the multiple occasions that attest to this collaborative enterprise throughout *Maquilápolis* definitely emphasize the existence of a process that does allow the *promotoras* to express their own voice and apprehensions through their manipulation of the camera. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to assume that *Maquilápolis* is majorly the result of a documentary-producing workshop for blue-collar *tijuanense* women. And while the producers of this film categorically insist in their shared filmic responsibility with the documentary's subjects, there are enough instances of mediation within *Maquilápolis* to qualify these statements. After all, this is the case for all 21st century cultural products, which must go through some form of mediation in order to reach their intended audiences.

[114] The actual insert affirms "The women in this film developed and created its images, sounds and ideas in collaboration with the filmmakers."

For, behind all the simplicity that could be expected of this documentary given its emphasis on the involvement of the *maquiladora* workers in its making, one must not fail to notice and comment on the refined intentionality of the visual and musical imagery of the film. One of the clearest examples of this sophistication comes in the form of the musical participation of members from the Nortec Collective in the score of the documentary.[115] Moreover, Nortec's peculiar sound help the filmmakers construct sequences in which the alienating nature of *maquiladora* work comes through in a symbolic manner. For instance, in one of the initial establishing shots of the film, the workers mimic —following the beat of Nortec's odd *fronterizo* mix— the mechanic movements required to assemble a variety of products in a simulated production line.

Similar stylized sequences appear at various points during the film; mostly representing the automated nature of the women's labor but also working as transition points between the stories of the two *maquiladora* workers and activists most prominently featured in *Maquilápolis*: Carmen Durán and Lourdes Luján. And while not all reviewers approve of Funari and De la Torre's highly choreographed visuals: "these unnatural images detracted from the same messages effectively communicated with eloquence and grace by the women in their own unscripted words" (Goldín 547); this controversy may be precisely one of the larger points that *Maquilápolis* intends to make. That is, by resorting to these uncanny yet artistic sequences and contrasting them with the more "home-made" documentary shots of interviews and videos by the participants of the *Maquilápolis* workshop, the film aims to provide the viewer with a multiplicity of perspectives from which to approach *tijuanense* working class women issues.

---

[115] The Nortec Collective is a good example of the *tijuanense* artistic boom, from the side of music and image, as a showcase of musical border hybridization between *norteña* and techno. For more information, see: <http://www.norteccollective.com/>

On the whole, though, the sophisticated visual pieces that appear from time to time in *Maquilápolis* not only contribute to the dynamic and aesthetic flow of the film, but are also part of a strategy to enhance rather than underrate the depth of its message, if in a somewhat quirky way. Besides, while still commenting on issues of format, it must also be pointed out that *Maquilápolis* is an artistic product that very intentionally departs from other, more traditional, documentary techniques, such as bringing in "experts" to validate the film's discourse. Instead, this documentary relies heavily on conveying its ideas through the aforementioned complementary methods of the carefully displayed visuals and the *maquiladora* workers' video diaries.

Because of its purposeful selection of this combined filmic methodology, *Maquilápolis* has been reviewed as "an innovative and successful experiment in filmmaking from below, with the workers themselves filming, doing the narration and both interviewing and being interviewed, while the professional filmmakers provide the postproduction polish" (Winn 161). And yet, it can be argued that the overall aesthetics and rather "organic" structure of the film greatly support the idea that Funari and De la Torre offer a whole lot more than mere glossy editing to *Maquilápolis*. It would then be fair to reiterate that the presumed self-representation of the workshop filmmakers has a significantly mediated component —much like *testimonios*— even though at times this "professionalized" mediation may go unnoticed due to the film's internal coherence.[116]

Now, quite independently of the level of mediation in the film, it is apparent throughout *Maquilápolis* that its focus is *directly* centered on recounting the stories and struggles of the two

[116] As discussed in chapter 1 with relation to documentaries, there is a limited audience expected for films like *Maquilápolis*, composed mostly of academics, activists and others who are interested in gaining an in-depth knowledge of the problems surrounding *maquiladoras*.

women who function both as the film's main narrators and as emblematic representatives for female *maquiladora* workers in Tijuana. The first story presented in *Maquilápolis* is that of Carmen Durán, who *decides*, alongside other coworkers, to take legal action against her former employer of six and a half years, Sanyo. The reason behind their claim is the refusal of the *maquiladora* to give their workers severance pay when they abruptly moved their operations to Indonesia in search of an even cheaper workforce. This very *public* aspect of Carmen's life will be contrasted all through the documentary with her private identity, as they intersect in significant ways. In fact, one of Carmen's first entries to her video diary highlights her role as a single mother of three, but almost immediately and concurrently situates her family environment within the film's larger narrative of social justice. This is accomplished with a seemingly innocent shot where Carmen first pans the camera to show her children and then takes it to "tour" the humble *colonia* Lagunitas where they live.

This first introduction to Carmen's home surroundings is relevant within the entire filmic structure of *Maquilápolis* because it sets the scene for a more in-depth discussion of the living conditions of the working-class inhabitants of Tijuana. Later in the documentary, for instance, it will be established how these impoverished dwellings are even a source of immediate danger for the residents, as children in Carmen's *colonia* are frequently at risk of being electrocuted by the lack of proper sewage and electrical systems. Additionally, the shot of crackling downed electrical wires that have fallen into the dirty puddles in the street is further evidence of Carmen's insightful vision as a filmmaker, as it provides a crucial —and *private*— background to the other side of her narrative that deals with her very public confrontation with the "absconding" *maquiladora*.

With her girlish looks and small frame, Carmen seems to be an unlikely warrior in this legal battle against considerable odds that she herself characterizes as a "David vs. Goliath" narrative. And yet, this unequal depiction of Carmen's struggle almost works as a leitmotif in *Maquilápolis,* as the film underlines grueling accounts of overwork and hardship in a trying working environment where unions are routinely paid off by the corporations and workers get fired as a matter of course if they try to organize independently.

In a somewhat comparable vein to Carmen's labor conflicts with the *maquiladoras*, Lourdes Luján, the second amateur filmmaker featured in *Maquilápolis,* also connects her story to issues that clearly go beyond her underprivileged community and her life as a *tijuanense* housewife. Thus, the first part of her video account is intertwined with her struggle for environmental justice that parallels Carmen's unlikely strife with the electronics company. On a more *private* level, these two storylines are further related because of the recurrent association they make between the environmental issues that arise from their impoverished surroundings and Carmen's and Lourdes's emphasis on motherhood as a prime motivator behind their efforts. Hence, while the camera pans to the dirty looking creek that crisscrosses Lourdes's *colonia* Chilpancingo, she narrates how she and her children are ridden with hives because of all the chemicals that the factories routinely dump into their stream or release into the air. Rather nostalgically, Lourdes reminisces about how this same creek used to be clean when she was a young girl, long before the factory-filled complex called "Industrial City" was constructed on a hill directly above her *colonia* Chilpancingo. Here, it is important to notice a sense of ownership of this space, despite all its poverty; in a way, the fight for her children's future is what encourages Lourdes to defend this rather wretched site. Carmen, for her part, refuses to wash her children's clothing with her own because of all the chemicals she is exposed to at work, thus

providing an additional example of the connection between her maternal role and the environmental degradation caused by the presence of the *maquiladoras* in these women's lives.

Being that the film centers exclusively on the representation of Mexican women, the recurrence of maternity as a topic is not surprising. However, it is quite noteworthy that these feminine portrayals do not abound on any ideas of *victimhood*, not even when one of the *promotoras*, Delfina Rodríguez, states that the greater part of female *maquiladora* workers are on their own financially: "la mayoría de las mujeres somos dejadas, […] madres solteras." ['most of us are separated and single mothers.'][117] This economic independence, rather than negatively stereotyping the mothers in *Maquilápolis* —as it does the women of Juárez— appears to endow them with a connotation of empowerment that seems incompatible with any self-perception as victims.

In fact, throughout the film, the women identified as *promotoras* display a rather elevated degree of feminist and socioeconomic awareness. While this may be surprising considering their limited level of formal education, it is not so within the context of the activist associations they belong to, which have not only molded them as community organizers but have additionally offered them an ideological background that has greatly influenced their self-image. *Maquilápolis* does recognize, then, how the non-conformist attitude of these *tijuanense* women activists has been affected by particular organizations, namely Grupo Factor X —where Lourdes and Carmen first met— and CITTAC (Centro de Información para Trabajadoras y Trabajadores) [Workers' Information Center]. Since both of these groups play a significant role in the film's narrative, a brief explanation of their goals is in order. In her study of border non-governmental organizations, Silvia López Estrada classifies Grupo Factor X as an openly feminist NGO,

---

[117] The film translates "dejadas" as "separated" rather than "abandoned," which would be more accurate but have a less empowering connotation.

working for women's empowerment with an emphasis on women's worker rights (170).[118] With respect to CITTAC, where Carmen and her ex-coworkers manage to find a lawyer that will represent them disinterestedly against Sanyo, it can best be described as an advocacy association that seeks to support workers' labor rights in Baja California.[119] Now, beyond shaping the attitudes of *promotoras* such as Carmen and Lourdes, the greatest contribution of these groups may well be in their association with a tradition and a *language* of political consciousness, as well as in the concrete actions they have inspired.[120] For instance, in Grupo Factor X, Carmen is shown teaching other women about "derechos de la mujer y derechos laborales" ['women's rights and labor rights']. As for Lourdes, her work as a *promotora* prepares her for the formation of her own NGO, Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental [Chilpancingo Collective for Environmental Justice], which will be presently discussed at length.

Lourdes, the second narrator of *Maquilápolis*, actually begins her work as a *promotora* by conducting a survey for the San Diego Environmental Health Coalition, thus introducing the viewer to environmental binational activism at the U.S.-Mexico border. It is while doing this job that Lourdes becomes aware of the prevalence of birth defects like anencephaly and hydrocephaly in her *colonia* and surrounding areas. Subsequently, in her video diary, she shows further instances of what could be called "environmental abuse" by the *maquiladoras*: the overflow of toxic spills into the *colonias'* creek when it starts to rain or the fumes and the ash let

---

[118] López Estrada further characterizes Grupo Factor X as social feminist organization, which "addresses power relationships through gender analysis, but [also] focuses its attention on women of the popular sectors" (160). Feminist NGOs such as these started taking a more formal shape in Baja California during the 1990s (López Estrada 161).

[119] Source: http://www.maquilapolis.com/outreach_eng.html

[120] Another documentary centered on Tijuana, *Everyone Their Grain of Sand,* focuses on another kind of activism not directly related to the *maquiladoras*, but highly political as well: the social activism of *colonias populares*.

out by the factories that sting her eyes. All of these considerations are what in the end drive Lourdes to *create*, along with other concerned women, the Colectivo Chilpancingo, a homegrown NGO dedicated to the environmental protection of neighborhoods adjacent to *maquiladoras*. It appears that it is ultimately this feeling of belonging to a community that provides the affiliates of Colectivo Chilpanchingo to exercise an "unauthorized" grassroots activism that reaffirms their right to have a safe place to live. Thus, with this sense of fellowship, they direct their concentrated efforts, as portrayed in *Maquilápolis*, against a nearby abandoned lead recycling plant called Metales y Derivados.

The neglected factory is shown as a major source of lead poisoning, since piles of car batteries have been left out in the open to disintegrate. As Lourdes comments in her video diary, then the wind, the rain and the even the people who walk around it on their way to work, bring the lead to their homes. *Maquilápolis* subsequently follows the Colectivo's drawn out path of environmental activism, beginning with their visit to PROFEPA (Procuraduría Federal para la Protección del Ambiente) [Federal Prosecution Agency for Environmental Protection], where they stage a protest. It is thus rather ironic to note that the PROFEPA had originally closed down the plant, after which the owner of Metales y Derivados, José Khan, fled to San Diego. At the PROFEPA rally, the viewer can definitely appreciate the savviness of this small group of women, who make sure the cameras of a major Mexican TV network (Televisa) are rolling to record their confrontation with the PROFEPA delegate as he attempts to leave his office building. However, all the Colectivo's efforts at that time prove ineffective given that the delegate claims that his agency has already done all they could by fining the company. Furthermore, when they wrote to then President Vicente Fox demanding a solution, the only answer they received is that the plant had already been properly sealed. The film, quite

purposefully, at that moment contradicts this claim visually. Here, it is also worth mentioning that the struggle to pressure PROFEPA, and by extension, the Mexican government is an integral part of the narrative of the film.[121]

Despite all these setbacks, shown in the documentary, the activists of Colectivo Chilpancingo continued their campaign undeterred, and in 2004, after ten years of struggle, a binational agreement was signed to agree to a formal commitment to pay for the cleanup of the abandoned site. The women in the film recognized that until they achieved international media coverage, the environmental government agencies on both sides of the border did not respond to their petitions. The final and long-awaited victory noticeably modifies the self-representation of these women, as they playfully recognize that the government appears to be afraid of "amas de casa" ['just housewives']. This added sense of empowerment for the women is nevertheless still linked to traditional maternal roles, as Lourdes's voiceover clearly states that "yo estoy luchando para dejarles a mis hijos un futuro más sano y más limpio" ['I am struggling to give my kids a healthier, cleaner future.']. In a way, this reappropriation of domesticity is an authentic "weapon of the weak," in which there is an inversion of the meaning of the "assigned and accepted" private space for women within the realm of the home, a space which is then made "public" by virtue of making it *political* (Ludmer 53).

On the whole, then, the efforts of the women portrayed in *Maquilápolis* bespeak of an enhanced socioeconomic consciousness that the film strives to emphasize, thus dispensing "with the kind of pitying formula of many labor-centered docus, instead presenting intelligent women awakening to their rights and doing something about it" (Weissberg 72). It is therefore not

[121] Unlike *La Batalla de las Cruces*, which relies more heavily on scattered sound bites from experts, the case that *Maquilápolis* makes against the Mexican government in this issue is quite intentionally constructed.

surprising that the Tijuana activists' views on globalization reflect a well thought-out perspective that is quite critical of it. The *promotoras'* opinion is thus indicated in statements such as "en la globalización, la mujer trabajadora entra como una especie de mercancía." ['within globalization, a woman factory worker is like a commodity.'] The objectification implicit in this assertion is also considered by the protagonists of *Maquilápolis*, since they are quite aware that, within the context of globalization, as "commodities" they are susceptible to being exchanged —or replaced with cheaper labor— as soon as they cease to be appealing. In the film, this situation is exemplified when the voiceover notes that 350, 000 *tijuanense* jobs have been "outsourced" to even less costly *maquiladora* locations since 2001. To underscore these circumstances, the dire case of one of the women in *Maquilápolis* is symbolized by the contrast between her almost motionless figure and the world that swiftly passes her by as she ponders "My future: unemployment."[122]

Furthermore, the *promotoras* manifest an understanding that, in Tijuana and in the rest of the U.S.-Mexico border, the appeal to hire women for the *maquiladora* industry was initially largely based on the common belief that Mexican female workers would turn out to be docile. The activism featured in the film —as well as the outlook that these female workers have on their entitlement to labor and environmental rights— obviously works to contradict this hypothesis. Now, the film's approach to globalization goes far beyond focusing exclusively on the assertive stance of the *promotoras.* It could be said that *Maquilápolis* even insists on historicizing the position of Tijuana as an epicenter of globalized socioeconomic forces; therefore moving beyond censuring specific corporations and implying larger national and

[122] This use of time-lapse photography, as other visual effects presented in *Maquilápolis*, is meant to be mainly symbolic. This particular shot gives the impression of this unemployed woman being left behind, while another time-lapse featuring all of the *promotoras* appears to represent their stability and strength in a rapidly changing world.

international actors in this predicament. And yet, globalization, from the perspective of the *promotoras*, is a quite personal and local phenomenon, as it entails an influx of desired capital but at the cost of a grave impact on their environment and on the health of their families. This is expressed in Lourdes' hope that "algún día haiga (sic) maquilas pero sin contaminar el medio ambiente" ['someday there will be factories but ones that don't destroy the environment'], a statement that underscores the ambivalent but seemingly indispensable relationship between Tijuana and the *maquila* industry. It would appear, then, that in *Maquilápolis,* the *promotoras'* knowledge of what "global" means "has everything to do, both positively and negatively, with their relations to their own regions, their own economies, and their own imaginaries" (King 12). Thus, their local stories become *globalized* in a similar and yet more specific way than the female characters of Conde's narratives. For even though Nina and María Elena do not explicitly ponder on the role that their association with Tijuana's industries plays in their lives, it is obvious that it is as defining as in the case of Carmen and Lourdes, as shown in *Maquilápolis.*

This tendency of Funari and De la Torre's film to incorporate their protagonists' reflections on a number of issues touching on Tijuana's globalization necessarily includes their thoughts —as has been stated earlier— on the way the Mexican government takes part in the complex phenomena that are derived from the *maquiladora* industry. Thus, the Mexican state is certainly blamed in the documentary for its failure to protect *maquila* jobs, even though there is also recognition of the pressures that transnational companies and finance institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have placed on the regional and national authorities in order to keep working conditions poor. One of the examples of this kind of coercion is the claim by Carmen's lawyer, Jaime Cota, that the IMF forces Mexico to violate its own labor laws —such as the one that prohibits caps on workers' salaries— in exchange for

loans. Now, on the *private* side of this story, Carmen and a neighbor both comment on how the government does not keep their electoral promises to them; thus failing to improve the living conditions that put them and their families at great risk, such as the electrical wires that have fallen into the water in the streets of their destitute *colonia*. Throughout *Maquilápolis,* examples like this illustrate how, in Mexico's globalized border, big factories and entrepreneurs are regularly given preferential treatment over the well-being, the homes and/or the jobs of the working class.

On the *public* aspect of Carmen's fight, the lopsided state of affairs in Tijuana continues even when the big companies are temporarily forced to admit defeat. Thus, even if a breakthrough settlement for her and her coworkers is reached with Sanyo, Carmen gets fired from her most recent job at Panasonic after six months because she was always falling sick. Now, while it appears that the cause for her frequent illnesses was lead poisoning caused by the fumes in her work environment, she asserts that Panasonic never warned her about the dangers she was facing merely by working there. Carmen was out of a job for a year after that, trying to regain her health. When she received an unprecedented $2,500 USD as her compensation from Sanyo, she tellingly invested part of the money on fixing what could be seen as a universal symbol of economic independence: the house she built herself. The fact that in Carmen's neighborhood most of the houses are made of discarded garage doors from the United States, adds to the ironic intermingling of the *maquiladora* workers' private and public lives. From aspects like these one can surmise that Carmen's narrative serves the dual purpose of illustrating both the interactions of global industry with local exploitation as well as the local resistance of these women to globalization's impingement on their work and domestic spheres.

Arguably, one of the most distinctive messages of *Maquilápolis* resides in the symbolic power of the connection of both women featured in it to a degraded physical space which they refuse to abandon; a space which, much to the contrary, they are trying to better and make their own. The numerous shots of both their *colonias*, particularly with all the health-related issues they highlight, as well as their evident poverty, constitute a poignant example of this important reappropriation of the *homely/unhomely* space.[123] A clear and divergent comparison can then be extended to Juárez, a border city whose inhabitants have all but given up on. This identification with Tijuana as a place to call home also provides an important contrast to many border narratives which consider this city as no more than a stepping stone *para ir al otro lado*" or even the ones that view it as a "Ciudad Maldita."[124] In the case of *Maquilápolis*, it then appears that "the likelihood of people's identity being determined by their commitment to their *city* […] is very real" (King 10). In some way, it follows that, in Funari and De la Torre's documentary, it is the dedicated border women, the *maquiladora* women, the public women, who "repossess" their dilapidated border town —as true *citizens* have both the right and the responsibility to do. Therefore the film's representation of its female protagonists becomes a most unusual one for this geographical area, to say the least. Finally, *Maquilápolis'* particular vision of Tijuana as a location its residents are able to identify with, is further expanded when the composition of its population is highlighted. For Tijuana, once a beacon for job-seeking immigrants "from the

[123] I am intentionally alluding to Homi K. Bhabha's vision of the "unhomely" as a condition where "the public and the private become part of each other" (*The location of culture* 9). For the women of *Maquilápolis*, the unhomeliness of their home is precisely what makes it worth fighting for.
[124] In Rosina Conde's story "Una se Encariña con las Cosas, Timoteo," men's activism in Tijuana takes on a deadly toll, thus the epithet of "Accursed City" (Conde, *Arrieras Somos* 34).

South," is equally depicted as *home* by "newcomers" and natives alike, united in the fight to improve their living conditions.[125]

The multifarious constitution of Tijuana's citizenry is reflected in *Maquilápolis* when one of the final voiceovers states that the faces of this city are multiple: "la del migrante, la de la injusticia, la del hambre, la de la inseguridad, la de la maquila, pero también la de los sueños" ['of the migrant, of injustice, of hunger, of insecurity, of the *maquiladora*, but it's also the Tijuana of dreams.']. Playing on this theme, the ending shot resonates with the film's entire narrative of hope by showcasing these women's aspirations to improve their lives individually and for their community. It does so by featuring all the *promotoras* in their blue operator smocks, while Carmen's off-screen voice is heard, reflecting on her ambition to become a lawyer. Now, while the audience may appreciate that the protagonists of this documentary do end up in a better socioeconomic state than at the beginning, it cannot be said by any stretch that it has improved so as to have turned the tables on their exploiters.[126] Furthermore, the film does not openly discuss whether there has been an effective transformation in the level of agency that the women of *Maquilápolis* may be able to exercise in their daily lives as a result of their activist victories.

Nevertheless, the film does make a point of emphasizing that the activists of *Maquilápolis* appear to have reached the paradoxical state of a female subaltern who is able to speak (Spivak 287). Or, at least, that they have significantly contributed to their own representation as *mujeres tijuanenses,* a portrayal that takes a completely different route than the

---

[125] One of the aspects that *Maquilápolis* shares with the feature film *El Jardín del Edén* (1994) by María Novarro is precisely this highlighting of the conditions of immigrants from central Mexico to the border. Represented by the character of Serena, the protagonist of Novarro's movie also touches on the theme of the *madre sola* so prevalent in border texts.

[126] It would appear that these extreme reversals can only occur in fiction, as demonstrated in "Señora Nina."

common stereotype of hypersexualization. Moreover, both Lourdes and Carmen are purposefully depicted in the documentary as increasingly self-assured women, as they progressively show their confidence in the course of their video diaries, through their choices of interviews and denouncements. Carmen's video interventions are good examples of her intensified sense of worth, as she is able to effectively and poignantly interview very disparate subjects. These interviewees range from the neighbor who almost had his daughter electrocuted by the downed wires in their *colonia* to the owner of the property that used to house another "fugitive" *maquiladora*.[127]

If one considers the video diaries in *Maquilápolis* as a modern entry to the Latin American tradition of testimonial literature, it would follow that the film is indeed trying to showcase a discourse of dignity, precisely because the *promotoras'* struggle reaffirms basic human and civil rights. Indeed, their fight against the public and private health terrors inflicted by the presence of the *maquiladoras* in their lives, while ostensibly not as evident and immediate as the case of the feminicides in Juárez, is still, as aforesaid, of a very serious nature. And yet, as Carmen's lawyer tells her, "eso [su dignidad] puede vencer a cualquiera" ['your dignity can defeat anybody.'] Both Carmen and Lourdes, having played —and won— as underdogs against considerable odds, are the film's cases in point to establish that this representation of *tijuanense* women is certainly possible.

Ultimately though, even as the portrayal of "successful" *maquiladora* activists is viable within the context of *Maquilápolis,* in actuality it cannot be argued that this is part of prevalent or popular depictions of working class women in Tijuana, which, as mentioned earlier, range

---

[127] Carmen's last video entry gives the viewer a feeling of déjà vu: her next job after Panasonic is at Hansanmex, a *maquiladora* that "disappeared" by making an illegal change of venue to the other side of the city and later arguing they were bankrupt to evade taxes. Not surprisingly, Carmen decides to sue them.

from a significant disregard to disparaging associations with rampant poverty and prostitution. Therefore, it is understandable that the *maquiladora* workers who have the opportunity of having their voices heard through their participation in the film are bound to select their *own* images, much like the Nortec fans that focus on rather unsavory components of "Tijuana life in order to make these elements visible rather than ignoring them" (Valenzuela Arce, *Paso del Nortec* 86). But instead of concentrating on visions related to drug-trafficking, like the *nortecos,* the women of *Maquilápolis* evidently choose those images that best depict their concerns and their multiple identities as mothers, workers and dependable members of their communities.

And while these feminine representations have been discussed at length in the present analysis, the specific aspects that were overlooked in the documentary should also be considered briefly, as they provide an additional insight into the overall outlook of *Maquilápolis*. Namely, the fact that the film completely bypasses all questions of sexuality and patriarchy is in and of itself, somewhat unexpected, particularly in comparison with Conde's narratives, where the unequal relationships between the sexes are so central. It would appear, then, that in Funari and De la Torre's construction of empowered *tijuanense* women, there is no space for patriarchal inequities that may contradict this mold.

Given the uncommon nature of the portrayals of the *maquiladora* workers and activists in the documentary, it follows that the more stereotyped feminine characterizations ―generally implying certain victimization― are mostly bypassed in this text. This can be additionally explained by considering that, in many ways, *Maquilápolis* attempts to break ground in its representation of women's identities, precisely by linking them to their "controversial" city, thus supporting the argument that: "it is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new movements of the people are played out" (Bhabha, *The location of*

culture 170). Indeed, *Maquilápolis* consistently highlights the radical quality of the *promotoras* ―beginning with the film's (re)signification of the "public woman"― *within* the scenario of Tijuana, thus likening these activists to their "modern, contradictory, cosmopolitan city with a strong definition of itself" (García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures* 234). In some respects, then, by bringing these atypical depictions of *tijuanense* working class women to the fore, the film intends to stress the relevance of these otherwise discounted women in order to fully complete the picture of this Alpha/Omega of Latin America. Ultimately, in doing so, *Maquilápolis* shows a distinctly alternative route for border activism, one based on a more egalitarian binational cooperation that disavows the construction of Mexican border women as victims.

2.3 The alpha and the omega: *Mujeres de Tijuana.*

In order to effectively analyze the representations of women in Tijuana, arguably the most iconic city in the US-Mexico border, cultural researchers must do their best to avoid becoming cultural tourists who project (amazed or disgusted) onto Tijuana their own idea of what border culture should be (Palaversich 117). In this sense, the texts examined in this particular chapter are intended to serve as counterexamples to visions that constrain the portrayals of *tijuanense* women to either a *leyenda negra* of destitution, gaudy mirages and sexualized "public women" or automatically and uncritically include them into well-intended tributes of this city as a laboratory of postmodernity (García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures* 233). It follows that when one considers these border women as central characters in cultural texts, there is a multiplicity of perspectives to bear in mind, which necessarily interact with *and* go beyond all sorts of stereotypes of *tijuanense* women.

One initial perspective from which to contemplate the emerging representations of *mujeres de Tijuana* must inevitably take into account the exchanges between the aforementioned private and public spheres in women's lives and images. This is also due to the tendency of the patriarchal social order to redraw "the domestic space as the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power" (Bhabha, *The location of culture* 11). Thus, any kind of portrayal that disrupts patriarchal expectations for that feminine private sphere and its public counterpart, works as an avenue for feminist subversion, much in the way that *Maquilápolis* and Conde's narratives do, by either reaching away from the norm or putting forth its own proposals or versions.

Another key component to keep in mind when analyzing the depictions of female protagonists in *tijuanense* cultural texts —or in any other text based on the U.S.-Mexico

border— is, obviously, globalization. In the two narratives examined here, globalization functions as a factor that impinges in one way or another on women's lives, from the "invading" presence of the marines in Conde's Avenida Revolución to the impact of the polluting and exploitative factories in the universe characterized in *Maquilápolis.* Unsurprisingly, the question of globalization elicits a particular response from the featured texts, as they recognize the complexity of its effects in their particular local situation and in the women's daily cultural interactions. Therein lays a crucial aspect of the uniqueness of these "made-in-Tijuana" representations of women: by exploring from a quite different angle the same images that would be central to a stereotyped vision of victimized, objectified women, the texts contend with these portrayals on their own terms.

Ultimately though, the alternative depictions of women that may surface from Tijuana's cultural texts are only currently commencing to (re)appropriate border stock images of women. And yet, by highlighting precisely those aspects that work against the progressive —even *nortec*hnologically enhanced— imagery of Tijuana's sociocultural renaissance, a space is created for the "inconvenient" appearance of Tijuana's oldest and newest "sins": the table dancer, the exploited *maquila* worker, even the committed dweller of a degraded universe. Against celebratory visions of Tijuana as a beacon for postmodern hybridity, even in opposition to the city's chauvinistic motto "Aquí empieza la patria" ['The homeland starts here'] these marginal, subaltern portrayals of women forcefully —and artistically— challenge attempts at overlooking or typecasting them.[128] In doing so, these depictions paradoxically open spaces for agency in the interstices of the border. In Tijuana, Alpha and Omega of Mexico and of Latin America, the

[128] Source: <http://www.tijuana.gob.mx/>

beginning of 21st century and the end of 20th century cultural representations of Mexican women might be at hand.

Chapter 3: *Malinches, madres, migrantes:* Mexican women on the move.

According to data from the Mexican National Population Council (CONAPO in Spanish), from 1970 to 2005 the number of Mexican citizens who immigrated to the United States came up to 10.6 million (CONAPO 20). Moreover, these immigrants have increasingly been entering the United States without documents; to the point that in the period 1997-2002, it was estimated that 75% of Mexicans who had crossed the border had done so as undocumented migrants (CONAPO 33). Considering the specificity of this statistical information, it is puzzling that there seem to be important disagreements over exactly how many of all recent Mexican migrants to the United States have been women, with estimate percentages varying from 25 to 42% depending on the sources (CONAPO 44).[129] Despite these differing figures, the latest sociological studies on Mexican immigrants have acknowledged that there has indeed been a steadily increased participation of women in this transnational flow of people (Durand and Massey 7), particularly amongst the ranks of undocumented migrants (Cerrutti and Massey 34).

In any case, all of these statistical trends point towards important factors which contribute to the actual characterizations of *las migrantes mexicanas* on both sides of the border in a variety of media such as news reports, documentaries, fictional writings, testimonies and commercial movies. Firstly, the cultural representations of Mexican women who migrate are enmeshed in their assumed state of "illegality" —brought forth by the criminalization of their undocumented permanence in the United States. Secondly, their portrayals are invariably affected by their condition of *invisibility*, as exemplified by a cultural "absence" made necessary precisely

[129] On an interesting note, some of these statistical differences may be attributed to reunification patterns that motivate women and children to join the male migrants who are already in the United States. This phenomenon thus causes a family to disappear in the Mexican census system and to reappear in the United States, where the larger figures of women migrants (42%) can be found (CONAPO 44).

because of the circumstances of living "under the radar." And yet, while studying the depictions of Mexican female migrants in an assortment of cultural texts, I find that a paradigmatic figure from Mexican historical and folkloric accounts casts its shadow in an even more encompassing manner over these constructions. This is Malintzin or La Malinche, Hernán Cortes' translator and, according to Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, the raped, but ultimately treacherous, "Mother" of Mexican culture (72). In this chapter, I will use this character as an explicative model to better understand the representations of *migrantes mexicanas*, often associated with *malinchismo* by virtue of being female border crossers.[130]

With the aim of investigating the contestations and reinterpretations of the imagery originated by the figure of La Malinche in the portrayals of Mexican female migrants, this chapter will concentrate on three recent fictional and non-fictional texts from both sides of the border. The first one of these texts, *Bread and Roses* (2000), is a mainstream narrative movie directed by Ken Loach and it presents a female protagonist, Maya, which incarnates a Mexican migrant who embraces ―Malinche-like― a "foreign" ideology, in this case, that of labor rights. And while the movie's viewpoint clearly supports a social message of interest to migrants in general, it fails to significantly depart from Hollywood-inspired conventions concerning certain stereotyped depictions of Latina/o characters. With at least a more culturally aware product, the second text to be analyzed in this chapter comes from Mexican director Patricia Riggen, who staged her commercially successful ―and conventionally melodramatic― perspective on Mexican migrants in *La Misma Luna* (2007). This movie's female protagonist, an anti-Malinche figure of sorts, thus portrayed a more traditional representation of Mexican women who cross the

---

[130] *Malinchismo* refers to the pejorative accusation directed towards the attitude of Mexicans who would ally themselves (metaphorically or literally) with a foreign power or adopt "alien" ways. Merely because of leaving Mexico, the migrant women are "at risk" of being considered *malinchistas*.

U.S.-Mexico border by concentrating on her typified role as an idealized, self-sacrificing mother. In an ostensible contrast to the visual construal of Mexican migration, the last text to be discussed in this chapter offers a distinct opportunity to reflect on the individual and collective voices of *migrantes mexicanas* in their own *words*. Alicia Alarcón's *La migra me hizo los mandados [The Border Patrol Ate my Dust]* (2002) is a compilation of testimonies by undocumented Latin American migrants and the selections from this book could initially be viewed from a post-Malinche standpoint, in the sense that this cultural icon gives way in the narratives' *themes* to more specific concerns of *migrantes indocumentadas*.[131] In fact, these first-hand accounts included in Alicia Alarcón's bicultural work mostly bespeak of personal transformation verging on transculturation and consistently focus on denouncing social inequalities as well as the aforementioned stigmas of invisibility and illegality.

Indeed, as long as the experience of Mexican migration to the United States continues to be tinged with discrimination, injustice, criminalization and despair, it will keep on generating contentious yet *formulaic* images of the women who dare to cross the border. In agreement with Charles Berg's assessment that "recognition, differentiation, devaluation [are] key functions of the [...] stereotype" (*Latino Images* 17), I would add that these tactics are not limited to cinematic portrayals but extend to a wider range of cultural products. Therefore, it becomes crucial to emphasize how the stereotypes of *las migrantes mexicanas* are commonly put forth by two different hegemonic groups: centralist Mexicans and U.S.-Americans. Considering the acute dissimilarities of these dominant groups, the extent to which the representations of Mexican women migrants touch on the controversial/paradigmatic figure of La Malinche —in a spectrum that goes from careful alignment to strong opposition to it— may seem rather extraordinary.

---

[131] I will henceforth refer to this book as *La migra*.

Yet, the perverse fascination of Mexican culture with the character of La Malinche facilitates the upsurge of this stereotype in mainstream cultural products from both sides of the border if one agrees with Norma Alarcón that the *malinchista* label can be extended to "anyone who has transgressed the boundaries of perceived group interests and values" (60). This is precisely why *las migrantes* who represent themselves in *La migra*, a subaltern and otherwise silenced group, are ironically ―like Malinche― feminine subjects hence defined by their act of speech and by their "defiant" behaviors, both of which are originated by their initial border crossing. As for the characters of *Bread and Roses* and *La Misma Luna*, their more limited "rebellions" against the oppressive status quo of undocumented migration can be evaluated within their particular reinterpretations of the stereotyped Malinche imagery. It would appear, then, that the importance of the analysis of the portrayals of *las mujeres mexicanas* who migrate to the United States lies in its capability to demonstrate unexpected *loci* for feminine agency in the midst of invisibility, silencing and slander.

Considering the paramount role of undocumented Mexican immigration in the shaping of cultural landscapes and ideologies in both countries, not to mention its significance regarding "glocal" sociopolitical and economic scenarios, the relevance of examining these representations thus becomes quite obvious. Therefore, the complex issues that pertain to culture, nation, gender, media and consumption, among other factors, will certainly be considered in the discussion of the interaction between the chosen texts and the (in)visible shadow of La Malinche.

3.1 *Bread and Roses* or, Manufacturing *neo-malinchista* dissent.

> "porque nosotros les damos de comer a esos cabrones […] les criamos a sus hijos y ellos siguen sin vernos." ['because we feed those bastards […] we raise their children and they still look right through us.'] Maya, *Bread and Roses*.[132]

In the spring of 2006, hundreds of thousands of people marched in U.S.-American cities big and small in support of so-called "illegal" immigrants' rights.[133] A piece of information that was mostly absent from mainstream media coverage in this instance was the fact that these protests were part of a long history of similarly oriented demonstrations. And while an encompassing immigration reform bill in the United States is, to this date, yet to be passed, there have been some advances —albeit limited— for specific organizations that promote the human rights of immigrant populations. Even as no movie or documentary on the 2006 marches has been produced yet, there is at least one example on film that fictionally recreates the story of one such immigrant-related social movement that attained an unprecedented success. Specifically, *Bread and Roses* (2000) narrates the struggles of the Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles in 1990, a movement that advocated and ultimately achieved better wages and working conditions for its unionized members of predominantly immigrant status.

British director Ken Loach had already shown his commitment to socially-conscious moviemaking in numerous feature films before *Bread and Roses*.[134] However, in this particular case, this same dedication to social causes resulted in a text which appeared to bypass more culturally sensitive —that is, less stereotyped— portrayals of Mexican immigrants in order to

---

[132] I will mostly use the film's translations into English. All other translations from Spanish will be my own.

[133] Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/10/us/10cnd-rallies.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin>

[134] *Carla's Song* (1996), which showcased the war the United States waged against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and *Land and Freedom* (1995), set against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, are only two examples of Loach's awareness-raising films.

concentrate on its larger theme related to the plight of unionism within the context of L.A.'s office cleaners. It is rather paradoxical then, that the movie's cultural insensitivity culminated in a feminine representation that would "invoke" a much-maligned —yet iconic— Mexican figure: La Malinche. In the present analysis of *Bread and Roses*, this depiction of the Mexican female migrant as unavoidably *malinchista* and therefore treacherous to her "own" community will be explored as it categorically befalls the two central female characters in the film. These neo-*malinchista* portrayals of Maya Montenegro, the protagonist, and of her sister Rosa, will be shown as enmeshed within a larger discussion of cultural and gendered expectations for *migrantes mexicanas*. Moreover, these characterizations will serve to problematize the film's evident intent of "manufacturing" empowered working class subjects who are able to effectively dissent with the abusive labor practices of their employers.

Now, in order to provide some context to the present analysis of *Bread and Roses*, a brief overview of previous filmic depictions of the Mexican migrant experience to the United States becomes necessary. From the standpoint of cultural studies, David R. Maciel and María Rosa García-Acevedo have made it a point to emphasize the differences in these portrayals depending on where the motion picture originated. On the U.S.-American side of the border, from the beginning of the 20th century up to the 1990s, Hollywood treated this topic by oscillating between warnings for a tighter border control and the portrayal of defenseless immigrants in need of a white champion (Maciel and García-Acevedo 196). According to Maciel and García-Acevedo, Chican@ directors would step up —starting in the 1970s— to offer an alternative and more realistic perspective in their filming of this theme, as part of a socio-politically committed artistic community (197). One could argue, however, that Chicano-directed movies such as Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983) and *My family/Mi familia* (1995) conformed more to

melodramatic standards than to those of realism —particularly when it came to the portrayal of women migrants— in an attempt both to muster support for the underprivileged immigrant population and to legitimize their U.S.-American genealogy which had begun with migrants from south of the border. Finally, this account of major U.S-American feature films that have portrayed *migrantes mexicanas* would not be complete without at least referencing John Sayles' *Lone Star* (1996), which generated a great deal of academic attention for its exploration of the clashes of gender, ethnicity and nationality in a Texan border town. And while Mercedes, the woman who migrated, was not a main character, she certainly contributed to the complexity of this film by invoking the shadow of La Malinche as she kept the secret of her interracial sexual relationship and of her undocumented migration in order to gain some acceptance in a xenophobic world.[135]

The similarities between *Bread and Roses* and *Lone Star* probably end at the evocation of La Malinche through the *liaison* between the Mexican woman and the white man, mostly because Maya, unlike Mercedes, takes a completely different path of confrontation and activism immediately after her migration to the United States.[136] The development of Maya's character is thus concurrent with the centrality of the labor conflict as the major plotline in Loach's movie. Moreover, from the beginning of *Bread and Roses*, Maya's actions are meant to establish her as a non-conformist heroine, a role model for working-class women. The story line therefore focuses on Maya's entry to the workforce of Angel Cleaning Services, on her subsequent

[135] This movie will not be analyzed in detail because the main characters are not migrants but born in the United States.

[136] The "original" relationship between Malinche and Cortés has oscillated in its characterizations from being marked by sexual violence through rape to being one that supposedly demonstrates the sexual irrationality of the woman, a factor which —according to her detractors— will ultimately compel her to betray her people (Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche* 7).

involvement with labor organizer Sam Shapiro, and, most of all, on their joined struggle to unionize Maya's fellow janitors and to better their working conditions. Sam and Maya's alliance not only drives the plot of the movie but also gives rise to a series of personal conflicts with her family and coworkers that ultimately bring about her characterization as a Malinche. It would then appear that the *malinchista* representation of Maya in *Bread and Roses* could very well be read as an unintended consequence of her projected portrayal as a Mexican Norma Rae.

In the end however, Loach's construction of Maya as a bastion of unionism problematically taints her rebellions against the status quo *within* her cultural surroundings. This is due to the negative —Malinche-like— associations derived from her actions as a *mediator* between her community of workers and what is at first an "alien" ideology of labor rights. And while these cultural subtleties were almost certainly lost in the expected audience of the film —Anglo, middle-class, left-leaning— my point here is to emphasize how, despite Loach's best intentions, certain depictions could be viewed as a representational disservice to the very subjects portrayed in this otherwise socially conscious text. Therefore, what may have been an empowering and predominantly positive construal of a *migrante mexicana* ends up enmeshed in ambivalence at best, particularly when Maya's "transgressive" behaviors are understood in consideration of her cultural context.

And yet, not all the scenes in *Bread and Roses* are detached from the background and experiences of Mexican immigrants to the United States. The initial shots of the movie, which use entirely a handheld camera to attain a rough, emotionally charged effect, are the cinematic equivalent of non-fiction undocumented border crossing stories such as the ones routinely presented in the mainstream news media and in the compilation of testimonies *La migra me hizo los mandados*. A group of migrants runs and stops, hides and runs again to the seemingly

inscrutable orders of their coyote until they reach the safety of a van that whisks them away onto a freeway, from where they get their first glimpse of the iconic Los Angeles skyline. The close-up shot of wide-eyed Maya establishes her as the protagonist early on and prepares the viewer for the first conflict of the movie. When the migrants are being "delivered," Maya's sister, Rosa, shows up without the full amount of money for the transaction, and the coyotes drive off with Maya. The following scenes are meant to offer a glimpse of the protagonist's character: although she is obviously frightened by the sexual threats of the two thugs and the kidnapping, she is no push-over, as evidenced by her defiant response to their taunts: "No mames, cabrón" ['Don't fuck with me']. Maya's gutsy attitude thus contrasts with the tears she tries to hold back even as the coyotes toss a coin to see who will get to "have" her first.

The ensuing outcome of Maya's dire predicament, while notably farfetched, serves to provide important insights not only into her characterization but into the movie's generic choices as well. The implausibility of this scene is evident from the start: instead of being raped in the van, Maya arrives at a seedy motel in L.A. with the unnamed *coyote* who "won" her in the coin toss. Rather than bullying Maya, the coyote tries to calm her down by distinguishing himself from his "*pendejo*" associate, even offering to carry her bag to the room. Maya senses she might have a chance to escape if she pretends to reciprocate his attraction, so she convinces him of taking a shower by arguing "he stinks" and starts singing "El Rey" with him to mask the noise she makes while she looks for the keys to the room.[137] Once she has them, she promptly runs away and locks the coyote inside the room while he is still in the shower. To add insult to injury, Maya takes off with the coyote's prized snakeskin boots, which he claims to be "las más picudas

[137] The humiliation to the coyote's masculinity, caused by Maya's escape, is worsened by his fumbling of the lyrics of this very iconic song "El Rey," one of those hymns to Mexican machismo.

de todo Tijuana" ['the coolest in all Tijuana']. This last symbolic detail completes the emasculation of the man who, after realizing he has been tricked, is last seen naked and jumping up and down in anger while Maya, boots and all, waves him goodbye from the street with her middle finger.

What could have been a gruesome rape scenario turns into an episode from a picaresque comedy, but this is not the only challenge to the viewers' expectations in this scene. While Maya's gumption is admirable, her situation is considerably lightened by the coyote's characterization as a lumbering and egotistical fool who is too distracted by Maya's adulation of his singing in the shower and of his long hair to become aware of her ruse. Furthermore, the upshot of Maya's precarious encounter with the coyotes offers at least two important clues as to what the viewer should expect from the film's treatment of its female protagonist. Firstly, Maya's actions typecast her early on as a variation of the stereotype of the Latina firebrand, by emphasizing her spunkiness as well as her rather amusing antics.[138] On the other hand, the somewhat comedic turn of events that results in Maya's escape works as a first indication that *Bread and Roses* could be categorized as a modern melodrama, complete with rather implausible situations where good prevails in the end. This depiction of Loach's movie as a melodrama not only contrasts heavily with the social realism label of his previous films but also in a way helps to downplay Maya's heroic qualities by caricaturing her character. The generic inclination of the film towards the melodramatic —almost *telenovela*-style— is not surprising though. Actually, there is a number of mainstream movies that deal with Mexican women who migrate to the United States which routinely fall into to this genre, defined by "the maudlin excesses and

[138] Charles Berg discusses this stereotype of Latinas in Hollywood films by linking it to the characterization he terms "the female clown," in which he includes Lupe Vélez and Carmen Miranda as examples (*Latino Images* 75).

unbelievable coincidences of […] scripts with overdrawn characterizations, smashing climaxes, and appeal to sentiment" ("Melodrama." emphasis mine).[139]

There will be plenty more fanciful scenes that perform as comedic relief throughout *Bread and Roses* where Maya is concerned, despite the film's goal of maintaining an overall thematic gravity. Thus, the first instance of the movie's projected solemnity can be appreciated as soon as Maya reaches her older sister's house, where she is told that the reason why Rosa did not bring enough money to pay for Maya's safe passage is because her Anglo husband Bert is very sick and can't work. This domestic tragedy will ultimately be a catalyst for the climatic point of the movie but at this point in the storyline it is overshadowed by Maya's insistence on working with Rosa cleaning offices downtown. Instead, her older sister has already gotten Maya a job at a bar, where once more her spitfire characterization comes forth as she insults the groping customers. Tired of her sister's persistence, Rosa finally gives in when Maya follows her to work one day and manages to get Maya a job with the non-unionized cleaning company Angel, by questionable means that will be subsequently revealed.

This setting of the aseptic, impersonal office building is where the main plot developments will take place, as the motley group of janitors gradually becomes aware of their labor rights, which will situate them in ever more direct confrontations with their despotic boss, Mr. Pérez. This antagonistic character displays a number of traits that easily identify him as a melodramatic Latin villain and therefore put him at odds with the Anglo hero, the union organizer Sam Shapiro. The detestable characteristics of cruelty, lust and corruption contribute to fitting Pérez's image to the Hollywood stereotype of the Latin *bandido* (Berg, *Latino Images* 68). Thus Pérez is shown to be mean and irrational when he fires an older woman for arriving late,

[139] *El Norte* (1983), *My family/Mi familia* (1995) and *La Misma Luna* (2007) come to mind.

lustful when he asks Maya to tighten her uniform and dishonest when he collects Maya's first paycheck as payment for employing her, adding insult to injury by telling her she is very "lucky" to have gotten this job.[140] And while all these interactions with Maya continue to confirm her as the heroine of this filmic narrative by opposition to Pérez's role as the movie's villain, it would appear that her character cannot avoid a certain infantilization that somewhat undermines her central portrayal and in fact stereotypes her as one of Hollywood's stock roles for Latinas, the "female clown" (Berg, *Latino Images* 73). Often falling neatly into this stereotype that ridicules Latinas by drawing out "derisive laughter and belittl[ing] the Latina Other" (Berg, *Latino Images* 75), Maya's childish and sometimes ludicrous behavior is nevertheless consistently linked to her potential as a subversive "troublemaker" within the film's narrative.

Maya's shenanigans additionally always seem to have an ulterior narrative motive. For example, when Maya presses all of an elevator's buttons and hides, this stunt shows the movie's eagerness to teach a karmic lesson to the same kind of snotty executives who previously ignored Maya and her coworker Rubén. Moreover, Maya's prank foreshadows the droll strategies that Justice for Janitors will undertake later on in their fight to secure workers' rights. By pulling this practical joke off, Maya also illustrates to the audience how she is willing and able to cross "the line separating proper from improper in various ways […] she says and does things not expected of undocumented workers who typically fear exposure" (Fojas 45). Indeed, Maya's fearlessness from her very first day in the job contrasts dramatically with Rubén's meek body language as he explains to Maya his theory about the peculiar effect of their cleaning uniforms: "Nos hacen invisibles." ['They make us invisible.'] By refusing to conform to the docility and invisibility

[140] The characterization of Pérez as a *bandido* can also be seen as combined with that of the male buffoon, because of his simplemindedness and his regressions "into emotionality" (Berg, *Latino Images* 72).

expected of her as a migrant, an ordinary worker and a woman, Maya distances herself from cultural, gendered and class-related expectations, therefore proving she has what it takes to be the unionist heroine of Loach's movie, but also prefiguring the dissociation with conventional values that will characterize her as a Malinche.

It is by means of comical instances such as the elevator incident that the movie emphasizes how Maya's clowning around is in tune with *Bread and Roses*' social message. And yet, the most decisive one of these humorous episodes is framed by the fortuitous first-time meeting of Maya and Sam. Once more, without paying much attention to believability, the scene presents Maya protecting a total stranger (Sam) who is fleeing from Pérez and the building's security guards. Without questioning who this unknown man might be or why he is being chased, Maya helps Sam by allowing Pérez and the guards to slip in the wax that Sam had thrown on the floor and subsequently facilitates Sam's escape by hiding him in her cleaning cart. This sequence marks the beginning of the ideological and romantic connection between them and it will have added relevance since Maya and Sam's liaison —intended to represent a problematic but symbolic union of ethnicities and backgrounds for the higher cause of worker's rights— paradoxically will alienate Maya not only from her peers but from her family, driving a wedge between Maya and her sister.

This split between Maya and Rosa will somewhat parallel the opposition of the characters of Sam and Pérez —albeit within family and racial boundaries— particularly as Rosa is progressively constructed as the anti-heroine in all matters concerning the nascent union. This negative representation of Rosa will be displayed in full view when Sam visits Rosa and Maya's house to proselytize about Justice for Janitors. Sam's insistent advocacy leads to a family altercation where the practical and distrustful Rosa confronts Sam over the risks of being

blacklisted for belonging to a union and immediately warns Maya "you'd better keep away from this 'payaso'."[141] As Maya starts to defend Sam's ideas ever more forcefully, Rosa loses her cool and ends up kicking Sam out of her house. It is clear from this first meeting between Sam and Rosa that she will not be seduced by his talk of solidarity and that she is perfectly capable of calling him on his status as an outsider: "We? We? When was the last time you got a cleaning job? […] don't ever say 'we.'" From this point onward, Rosa will verbalize "legitimate criticisms of the labor movement — the limits of its ability to protect workers, its top-down power structure, its blind idealism" but the film's narrative will routinely disregard Rosa's denunciations by depicting them as petty matters in comparison with Maya's lofty labor ideals (Nichols 114). In the end however, I believe that as far as the Montenegro sisters are concerned, their condition of being antithetical to each other will be limited solely to the context of Loach's unionist message. In other aspects of their characterization, such as their depiction as gendered members of a Mexican migrant community, I perceive that Rosa and Maya are gradually portrayed more as different avatars of the Malinche representation than as the monstrous doubles that *Bread and Roses* tries to construct over and over.

Now, while Rosa's delineation as a Malinche-like traitor will be direct, climactic and intrinsically linked to union matters, Maya's identification with this role will be subtle, nuanced and based on the definition of the Malinche icon as a Mexican woman who "accepts a different culture and rejects her own." (Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche* 153). Within the context of *Bread and Roses*, this "different culture" will be understood as the shared beliefs of unionism. Additionally, in Maya's case the connection to the shadow of La Malinche will be also made

[141] I find it telling that the actual epithet Rosa uses here is not the Spanish word for clown but "narizón" [big nosed man] and the movie chooses an incorrect translation to avoid politically incorrect references to Sam's Jewishness.

through her association with Sam, as he increasingly takes on the role of her mentor and, later in the film, of her romantic interest.[142] Nevertheless, at this point, the audience can appreciate that between them lies a current of sympathy that has already made Maya shift her "natural" allegiance to her sister in favor of Sam.

Maya continues to prove her incipient loyalty to Sam, this time to her fellow workers, by asking him to hold an informational meeting about the union at the office building where the janitors work. To reinforce her characterization as a conscientious future activist, the viewers are reminded that it is Maya who makes this call after Pérez arbitrarily fires an aging worker, Teresa, for being a few minutes late. In the meeting, when Marina, another janitor, tries to silence Sam and loudly voices her anxiety at the prospect that they will all be caught, Maya again shows her support for the union's (and Sam's) cause by vehemently confronting Marina: "No, shut up *you* […] you are a janitor like everybody else." And yet, Maya's obvious deference towards Sam does not appear to be fully reciprocated as Sam shows a patronizing attitude towards the janitors ["I'll explain to *you*"] that can be detected when he gives details of his plans to the workers with a rather crude diagram. This somewhat condescending gesture makes for greater irony when the sketch works as a precipitator of important conflicts in the film. This is because Pérez finds it and promptly fires Berta, the janitor who refuses to tell on the attendants to the meeting, which causes a distressed Maya to confront Sam at his apartment at 3 am.

This is possibly one of the least convincing moments of the entire movie, as Sam's bumbling excuses about the incriminating paper are accepted in time by a sniffling Maya after

---

[142] Maya's link to the popular representation of La Malinche by means of her relationship with Sam lies in the similarity of this bond with the one allegedly established between Malintzin and Cortés as lovers. And while the nature of this supposed liaison is disputed at best, La Malinche is still commonly made out to represent Mexican women who are "fascinadas, violadas o seducidas" ["fascinated, raped or seduced"] by a white man (Paz 72).

Sam offers her a drink. And yet, this rather lame resolution will help to uncover significant aspects of these characters; namely, that while Sam routinely turns on his charm to diffuse potentially explosive situations, Maya's sense of solidarity appears subject to counting on the approval of others —in this case, Sam's. Furthermore, in a related narrative twist derived from this scene, from this moment on Maya will practically throw herself at Sam at any chance she gets, casting some doubt over the underlying motivations of her support for Justice for Janitors. Much later, for example, at a union meeting while all the janitors are watching the news coverage of one of their successful "attacks" against the cleaning company, Maya basically drags Sam to an empty union office and starts making out with him, causing him to call her "a troublemaker."

This connection between Maya's sexuality and the political mission of the film is arguably one of the most problematic features of *Bread and Roses*, mainly since it reaches beyond the issue of gender representation and into the matter of cultural identification and symbolism in the aforementioned connection with the figure of La Malinche. Here, it would be fitting to get back to the characterization of Maya as *malinchista*, considering that La Malinche, just as any signifier, changes according to the "ideological requirements of a given sociocultural moment." (Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche* 4) Thus, it might not be so paradoxical that within the Los Angeles depicted in Loach's film, "where collective formations might provide new political identities, rights, and forms of belonging" (Fojas 44), the specific makeup of Maya's *malinchismo* will be contradictorily individualistic, as Maya's rationale behind her support of the union collective is shown to be progressively suspect, that is, more dependent on Maya's relationship with Sam than in a true sense of solidarity.

Nevertheless, the particular scene where Maya is indirectly accused of being a Malinche constructs this claim as more related with her unorthodox choice of Sam as a love interest than with her nontraditional —within expected Mexican cultural mores for women— individualism. Besides, this charge becomes further complicated due to the fact that it is leveled by Maya's fellow worker Rubén, who has been characterized in *Bread and Roses* as the hardworking, honest, "decent" Mexican man who, in addition, appears to vie unsuccessfully for Maya's affection. Therefore, when Rubén voices to Maya his decision not to risk his job by participating in union activities, Maya refuses to sympathize with his stated reasons, even when Rubén tells her that losing his job would compromise his hard-earned chance of getting a scholarship to attend college and, in the future, have a life together with her. As a response to Rubén's arguments, Maya answers that she doesn't know what she wants. Feeling understandably rejected, Rubén questions Maya about Sam, implying that Maya is politically involved only because of Sam and that she does not really like Sam because he "believes in something" (as Maya claims) but because Sam is white. Instead of contesting this indirect *malinchista* allegation, at this point Maya falls back into being a Latina hothead "straight out of central casting whose sole narrative function is to be politicized" (Matthews 37). Thus, her reply never addresses Rubén's imputation of *malinchismo*, as she claims to be implicated with the union:

> porque mi hermana trabaja 16 horas diarias desde que llegó aquí, porque su marido […] no tiene seguro médico como 40 millones de personas en este país […] ¡el más rico del mundo! [because my sister has been working 16 hours a day since she got here, because her husband […] doesn't have medical insurance like 40 million people in this country […] the richest in the world!]

Even as these lines evidently reduce Maya to a mere ideological mouthpiece for the film, it may be more disquieting that Maya's words do not actually serve to dispel the doubts cast over her allegiances. This is because Maya does not manage to convincingly affirm her motives for her political commitment, as none of her reasons actually come from hard-earned personal experience. Maya's inability to gain a practical understanding of the privations inherent to the immigrant's life, compounded with her rather mindless repetition of *Bread and Roses*' unionist "with-us-or-against-us" rhetoric, only adds to the immaturity of her character and brings back the specter accusation of *malinchismo*.

At this point is where the personification of Maya as a Malinche can best be appreciated as one particularly fraught with complexity, since Maya can be shown to embody —to an extent— both extremes of common Malinche representations: the alienated, foreign-loving woman depicted by Paz, Fuentes and Rascón Banda and the defiant, astute survivor portrayed by Castellanos, Gaspar de Alba and Moraga (Romero, "Foundational Motherhood" 29-40). Therefore, on the one hand Maya's "positive" Malinche side will be mostly based on her strong personality, her lack of submissiveness to authority, and her anti-establishment stance. On the other hand, Maya's "negative" Malinche features can be attributed to her lack of responsibility and insight for the consequences of her own actions —such as the firings that ensue from her unrelenting support of Justice for Janitors— as well as her lack of true commitment to her community, as can be seen in her dismissive attitude towards Rosa's and Rubén's concerns with the union. In Maya's case, then, both the positives and the negatives of the *malinchista* charge appear to come from "the assumption of an individualized nonmaternal voice" (N. Alarcón,

“Traddutora” 63), which seemingly calls out for emancipation and for a certain distancing from *selected* communal interests at the same time.[143]

And yet, *Bread and Roses* makes it difficult to establish just which social group should Maya —or Rosa— pledge their loyalties to.[144] For, even as Rosa’s connection to the figure of La Malinche is based on her betrayal of the incipient union, it later becomes clear that Rosa’s motives —unlike Maya’s— are firmly grounded in her sense of duty to her family. This makes for an even more melodramatic scene where Rosa is accused by Maya of selling out the janitors in what becomes the climax of the movie. The altercation between the sisters comes about when, after a union mobilization, Pérez fires several janitors he believes were implicated (including Rubén, who was not). Here, Maya learns, along with the viewer, that Rosa is the prime suspect for having double-crossed the workers in exchange for becoming a supervisor with health benefits for her family. Maya then rushes home to snarl at Rosa “nos vendiste […] eres una pinche traidora” [‘you sold us out […] you are a fucking traitor’]. Rosa’s emotional reaction to Maya’s facile denunciation is to pour out all the resentment she has accumulated throughout her life, confronting Maya with the fact that Rosa was a prostitute in Tijuana for five years in order to support Maya and their mother. Rosa goes on to disclose to her horrified sister that she got Maya the janitorial job by sleeping with Pérez: “¡me lo cogí por ti!” [‘I fucked him for you!’]. As Rosa continues to detail the appalling choices she has had to make since she left home, she places the blame for her personal tragedy on everyone who has always depended on her and turned the other way while she fixed it all: “que Rosa levante todos los pedacitos. […] todos se

---

[143] This transgressive voice attributed to La Malinche may explain the more positive take that both Mexican feminists and Chicanas have on her image.

[144] This situation replicates in a way the debates over the expected ‘national’ allegiances of the historical Malinche at a time when the notion of ‘nation’ was tenuous at best (Messinger Cypess, “‘Mother’ Malinche” 17).

hacían pendejos." ['Let Rosa pick up all the pieces […] everyone looked the other way.']. Rosa's recriminations ultimately implicate Maya indirectly in her sister's treachery, as Maya's naiveté did not stop her from also "taking advantage" of Rosa's actions —as can be exemplified by Maya's "use" of Rosa's help to migrate to the United States and to land a job as a janitor. At this point, Maya's previous self-righteousness crumbles, as Rosa's enraged appropriation of the *traitor* label "soy una pinche traidora" ['I am a fucking traitor'] contrasts dramatically with Maya's whimpering and repeated admission of ignorance of the harsh realities of her sister's life as a migrant "yo no sabía" ['I didn't know']. And yet, even while one could expect that Maya's recognition of the *pathos* that has been the foundation of her family life and of her own journey could bring about some redemption for Rosa; this is simply not the case. Thus, the scene ends abruptly as the camera focuses on a tear-stricken Maya, leaving the viewer with no sympathy for Rosa, as this is the last time we will hear her voice and the image of Rosa as a traitor will remain until the very end of *Bread and Roses*.

Additionally, within the narrative of Loach's movie, the portrayal of Rosa as a Malinche will not even allow for the more affirmative aspects of *malinchismo* (such as the assumed rebelliousness and the contravention of traditional cultural norms) that Maya is empowered enough to embody. Not even Rosa's motherhood —a conventionally positive attribute for a Mexican woman— manages to redeem her character. This lack of "salvation" for Rosa as a mother could be credited to the fact that in *Bread and Roses*, Rosa's relationship with her two children is not depicted as *the* most central part of her life. And although it may be argued that Rosa acts at times as a fierce maternal figure towards her younger sister, Rosa's representation continues to be bogged down by her biggest offense to the movie's ideology: opposing the union. Furthermore, the negativity of Rosa's depiction within the Mexican cultural context is boosted

by the motivation behind her betrayal, as Rosa's actions are not propelled *directly* by the desire to protect her children or Maya, but to gain medical care for her Anglo husband, whose diabetes is becoming critical. Once more, the racialized alliance of a Mexican woman with a white man, against the interests of her supposedly "natural" community, evoke the most damaging aspects of Paz's Malinche, which in Rosa's case is woefully completed with the confessed "sin" of actual prostitution.

Arguably the most important consequence of Rosa's disclosure, in terms of the plot of *Bread and Roses*, is that it indirectly compels Maya to make a momentous transgression of her own, one which notably problematizes her character in terms of Maya's association with the figure of La Malinche *and* with the film's true principles. The specific misdemeanor I am referring to takes place *immediately* after Rosa's confrontation with her sister and this sequence shows Maya committing a robbery at a gas station by tricking the attendant into the bathroom (she screams she found a body inside) and locking him in. Adding to the comedy of the scene, just as Maya is escaping, she encounters an entering customer and informs him that she trapped the man in the bathroom because "he pulled his pants down." This second man tells Maya to call the police while he "kicks [the pervert's] ass." All this positioning of Maya as a trickster who exploits her *gendered* image may remind the viewer of *Bread and Roses*' earlier typecasting of Maya as a Latina buffoon but, more significantly, it draws a parallelism with Rosa's use of her body in order to obtain money for the survival of her family. However, the recipient of the proceeds of Maya's ruse is not actually a relative but Rubén: since we later learn that Maya has used the stolen money to pay for Rubén's entrance fee to college. Maya's rash act of generosity will not be without consequences, for she will eventually be identified as the gas station thief and promptly deported.

The ending of Maya's story makes for great irony within the film, as the only reason why Maya is found guilty of the petty crime is that her fingerprints are matched to the scene of the theft when she is arrested at a protest rally for Janitors for Justice. With this conclusion, it becomes clear that *Bread and Roses* seems more preoccupied with highlighting the victory of the union than with the individual drama of its female protagonist, who is left with scant possibilities of returning to the United States. Thus, the punishment of Maya showcases the actual message of Loach's film, the promotion of "political and civic engagement [over] a tactic of transgression" (Fojas 51), without a true concern for the individuals that make up what can now be seen as a rather moralistic movement. Moreover, while it is apparent that Maya's deportation works in the movie as a chastisement for her social trespasses, it is further ironic that Maya's sacrifice is ultimately an empty one as all of her fellow workers are reinstated in the end. As for Maya's characterization as a Malinche with regards to her allegiances, the movie leaves this facet of her description as problematically unclear. On the one hand it would appear that Maya is trying to compensate for the burden and the consequences of her sister's treachery by committing a wrongdoing of her own, this time for "her" people. On the other hand, however, it does not seem that Maya's actions represent any real "change of heart" concerning Rubén, Rosa or Sam, for Maya carries on supporting the union up to her detention. Moreover, there is no evidence of further insight on Maya's side about the underlying nature of her commitment to this cause, which continues to look as stemming from an individual/romantic motivation rather than a truly collective one.

The film's narrative treatment of Maya is only one of *Bread and Roses*' missed opportunities to engage in a serious cultural discussion that would create a greater feeling of empathy for the janitors and for their cause by making them more believable within their

particular collective context. Instead, “Loach barely individuates the workers [and at the same time] barely touches on the social texture of LA’s Hispanic neighborhood” (Quart and Kornblum 119), thus reducing his Latino/a characters to rather formulaic representations. Considering the film’s fairly obvious goal of social awareness, it is regrettable that its method of manufacturing dissent does not include engaging its subjects’ unique social background in a profound manner.

As for Maya and Rosa, the conclusion of *Bread and Roses* once more underlines the contradictions of their characterizations and the peculiarities of their portrayals as *migrantes mexicanas*.[145] One of these particularities is connected to the unintended effects of the act of migration itself. While Rosa’s life is utterly turned around and exposed by Maya’s journey to the United States, Maya herself remains *unchanged* in her juvenile personality following her migration, failing to demonstrate much maturity even when faced with the knowledge of Rosa’s sacrifices. It would seem that this filmic production was simply too preoccupied with portraying the dignity of a social struggle to be overly concerned with providing more credibility and depth to the character of one young female migrant who shows little in the way of a personal transformation as a result of her crossing.

Ultimately, though, the linkage of the personas of Maya and Rosa with the iconic Malinche will be the most distinctive aspect of their characterization as Mexican women migrants. The connection of the Montenegro sisters in *Bread and Roses* to the accusation of *malinchismo* —while regrettable and mostly veiled— thus replicates a crucial feature of the popular representation of women migrants in the Mexican imaginary: women who forfeit their

[145] The final shot of Maya being taken to the Tijuana border by bus, while Rosa runs after her trying unsuccessfully to say goodbye, is increased in its poignancy by the fact that Rosa chooses not to get close to the bus while the other janitors are bidding Maya farewell. Rosa, therefore, is paradoxically last seen as a voiceless traitor (we cannot hear her since the shot’s perspective comes exclusively from inside the bus) while the formerly heroic Maya is rendered helpless and defeated.

"homeland" and become "corrupted" by foreign ways. It is noteworthy then that the mythical Malinche, for Sandra Messinger Cypess, has already conjured up "the image of the displaced woman, exiled or disconnected from her own community" ("'Mother' Malinche" 14). Needless to say, the question of just which community Maya or Rosa —or, for that matter, any migrant— should pledge allegiance to is as thorny as it must have been for La Malinche herself.

All in all, any assessment of the *malinchismo* of the main female characters in *Bread and Roses* is bound to be complex, to say the least. The difficulties in appraising the *malinchista* depiction in the cases of Maya and Rosa may originate from the problems that Chicana feminists in particular have encountered when attempting to balance the positive and the negative traits of La Malinche's image (Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche* 151). And yet, neither of the Montenegro sisters is ever signified as any of La Malinche's most favorable reinterpretations: as a promoter of hybridity through transculturation or as a bridge between cultures (Romero, "Foundational Motherhood" 40-41).[146] Instead, Maya and Rosa's more encouraging *malinchista* qualities can only be appreciated from a feminist perspective as they both embody —to some extent— subversion against patriarchal mores. In Maya's case, the empowered Malinche within her rebels against cultural expectations of submissiveness, passivity and victimization for Mexican women whereas her untrustworthy Malinche side is shown to have little depth, unclear allegiances and dubitable values. As far as Rosa is concerned, she is definitely portrayed as a strong female character —even as a radical iconoclast that goes against models of expected sexual behavior. Nevertheless, at the same time Rosa can also be interpreted as a victim of a system of corruption and sexualization surrounding Mexican women at the border. Furthermore, the motives behind Rosa's betrayal (her family), although "positive" within her cultural context, are never enough to

[146] Besides, the depiction of Loach's migrants as neo-Malinches does not consider the element of race that is crucial to the original Malinche representation.

exculpate her within the film's narrative, where she remains as a negative icon of *malinchismo*. In the end, while both Maya and Rosa assume their roles as Malinches in *Bread and Roses*, they make the *malinchista* characterization their own as well, by taking it beyond the limiting ideology of the movie and unintentionally addressing more avenues of dissent —cultural, gendered— than expected.

3.2 All about my (Mexican) mother: *Evadiendo a la Malinche en La Misma Luna.*

> "Nadie escoge vivir así […] a menos que tenga una buena razón […] para ella, tú eres esa razón." ['Nobody chooses to live like this […] unless they have a good reason […] for her, you are that reason.'] Enrique, *La Misma Luna*.[147]

In the United States, the conventional news media readily offers pieces with scandalous titles such as CBS's "Illegal Immigrant Births - At Your Expense" that hysterically link the figure of the female Mexican migrant with the increased sense of vulnerability cultivated in the U.S.-American public on two fronts: national security and the struggling economy.[148] In this report, melodramatic devices such as the reference to "mothers about to give birth that walk up to the hospital still wet from swimming across the river in actual labor … dirty, wet, cold" are employed to establish the imminent threat of an invasion.[149] The fact that this "unstoppable incursion" is being marketed as playing upon the good will of "law-abiding citizens," makes it all the more threatening to those who identify themselves as the wronged party and camouflages the racist and classist undertones of this popular argument.

From the Spanish-speaking U.S. media such as Univisión, the often-tragic stories of undocumented female migrants also resort to the conventions of melodrama, although the picture they portray is the complete opposite to the aforementioned example, as it is unapologetically sympathetic. Meant for a Latino/a audience, the personal point of view is routinely emphasized, and the script reads like that of a soap opera, minus *el final feliz*: 'poor young indigenous girl leaves a child and a mother behind as she attempts to cross the desert in search of a better life in

[147] I will mostly use the film's translations into English. All other translations from Spanish will be my own.
[148] The full printed article can be found at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/04/07/eveningnews/main4000400.shtml?source=search_story>
[149] The quote is by Joe Riley, CEO of the McAllen Texas Medical Center it and was taken from the CBS story previously referred to.

the United States. She is stranded by her coyote and only her remains are found.'[150] Again, the lack of depth of the reporting is well tailored for the sound bite format of the news piece, utilizing enough melodramatic elements to tug at the insecurities, the memories or the solidarity of the target audience, ready consumers of this kind of stories.

Accordingly, the shadow of melodrama routinely permeates characterizations constructed by the mass media in both Mexico and the United States, thus creating a complex interaction between allegedly objective, non-fictional depictions and the fictional, partial ones that may be expected from mainstream movies such as Patricia Riggen's *La Misma Luna [Under the Same Moon]* (2007). In the present examination of this film, I will analyze how it deals with the issue of Mexican undocumented immigration to the United States by quite intently focusing on a female lead that is, coincidentally, almost the polar opposite of Maya in *Bread and Roses.* Thus, *La Misma Luna* uses an extremely successful —if quite problematic from a feminist perspective— feminine characterization in order to appeal to a variety of key intended audiences on *both* sides of the border. Rosario, its female protagonist —played by well-known Mexican actress Kate del Castillo— is hence presented as an incarnation of *the* self-sacrificing, virginal Mexican mother, an archetype well rooted in the national psyche and well exploited in a variety of popular melodramatic formats. This portrayal of Rosario as *una buena madre mexicana* first and foremost, is accomplished in *La Misma Luna* by using structural cues from *telenovelas* in search of the movie's commercial success.[151] In fact, the *telenovela*-inspired structural patterns displayed in Riggen's film, such as the "persistent use of standard melodramatic devices (returns from the past, reversals of fortune, etc.)" (Lopez 261) was arguably one of the most effective

[150] This example can be viewed at <http://www.univision.com/content/videoplayer.jhtml?cid=1601585>

[151] Interestingly, del Castillo's debut as an actress was in Mexican *telenovelas* in the 90s.

means to achieve the identification with different audiences that undoubtedly contributed to the *La Misma Luna*'s box office success.[152] At the same time, the idealized characterization of the female protagonist certainly helped the movie in its ideological staging of the "proper" *mexicanidad* all migrants should aspire to as long as they remain *del otro lado*.

I believe that this ideal of Mexican identity for migrants to relate to was constructed in Riggen's picture by opposing it to a phantasmatic and paradigmatic figure. Therefore, in stark contrast with the "model" motherly femininity presented in *La Misma Luna*, the ghost of La Malinche crept into the filmic narrative as the symbol of what Mexican migrant women should avoid at all costs. That is, the type of mother represented in the character of Rosario —dependable, conventional, tantalizingly chaste— could be clearly contrasted with the kind of migrant woman portrayed by irresponsible, free-spirited, sexually independent and allegedly *malinchista* Maya.[153] The "dangers" of becoming identified with the maligned Malinche figure may very well arise from the idea that "in the Mexican cinema feminine sexuality is indeed equated with treachery […] To avoid being perceived as a traitor, a woman must remove herself from the sphere of sexual pleasure [becoming] the asexual, long-suffering mother" (Berg, *Cinema* 24). And while it would be a far cry to consider Kate del Castillo a 21st century Sara García, *La Misma Luna*'s abnegated female protagonist should still be regarded with some feminist suspicion, as she appears poised to normalize other migrant female characterizations that may stray from patriarchal (and nationalist) ideals. In the following pages, I will explore the

---

[152] Up to July 2008, the movie had had a gross total of $12,589,108 in the United States. Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0796307/business>

[153] At this point, I think it is worth mentioning Alejandro Springall's film *Santitos* (1999), as a film whose protagonist parallels Rosario in many ways: as a self-sacrificing migrant Mexican mother, Esperanza is alternatively and problematically presented as innocent and sexy. *Santitos* has not been selected for analysis so as to avoid repetition of the studied representations and to offer variety in the filmic themes presented.

complications of Rosario's image as the "perfect" migrant Mexican mother vis-à-vis the movie's expectations for a particular kind of national gendered identification that effectively rules out all other alternative Mexican femininities.

Ironically, *La Misma Luna* is essentially a story about a mother who fails at this role, as she is unable to protect her son and remain at his side.[154] Director Patricia Riggen's first feature film goes deep into the angst of that failure, signified by the separation of Rosario from her child, Carlitos. Keeping with the thematic simplicity required by melodramatic standard, the young boy's quest for an ever more idealized mother will thus function as the narrative motor behind the plot of the film. The story line is quite clear-cut as well: the spunky nine-year old braves all sorts of odds to be with his mother as he travels from Juárez to Los Angeles when his caretaker grandmother dies. Rosario in the end does succeed at personifying the perfect mother, though almost by no fault of her own, as Carlitos gets to her and not the other way around.

The final result of the motion picture, the joyous reunion of mother and child, can even be seen as replicating the adoration of the Mexican people for their own Virgin mother, *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. At this point, it seems wise to keep in mind Norma Alarcón's position that brings La Malinche back into the picture; namely, that "Guadalupe and Malintzin have become a function of each other," "monstrous doubles" of sorts (61). Therefore, the alignment of Rosario's character with the icon of maternal self-denial represented in the Mexican imaginary by Guadalupe not only makes up for her "failure" as a mother but also inevitably places the figure of La Malinche at the center of this analysis, even if by constant opposition to Guadalupe, the quintessential Mexican mother.

---

[154] The critically acclaimed *Babel* (2006) also presented a tale of migrant motherly fiasco in its focus on Amelia, as a third of its overall thematic exploration of alienation.

Before carrying on with this evaluation of *La Misma Luna*, it seems convenient to situate this motion picture within the context of Mexican cinema, where three distinctive periods of immigration genre films can be distinguished. The first one corresponds to the time between 1922 and the late 1960s and these movies tended to be didactic, regularly using Mexico as a symbol of nostalgia and the United States as a metaphor for disaster and abuse (Maciel and García-Acevedo 154). The second period, set before the Mexican film industry crisis of the 90s, seemed to repeat that symbolism in an array of B-movies where a formula of excessive violence and sex was the norm when dealing with immigration issues (Maciel and García-Acevedo 175). Finally, the period which spans from the 1990s to the present day has produced a mix of *auteur* and globalized cinema. These movies, such as Novarro's *El Jardín del Edén* (1994), Springall's *Santitos* (1999) and González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) have attempted to offer a more artistic perspective to the topic of Mexican migration (Maciel and García-Acevedo 184), while at the same time appealing commercially to more diverse audiences than ever.

The commercial draw that these "new" Mexican immigration films have generated can be explained by focusing on the model employed in *La Misma Luna*, where an unapologetically sympathetic perspective towards migrants is supported by the use of the traditionally popular melodramatic genre. At this point, it may be worth highlighting that part of melodrama's appeal with regards to the theme of Mexican migration to the United States can readily be explained by the assertion that melodrama as a film subgenre "is present in the struggle against evil spells and outward appearances, […] a struggle *to be recognized by others*" (Martín-Barbero, "Memory" 277). Therefore, melodrama falls right into what could be considered an overarching battle that

Mexican migrants wage for acceptance and the formation of their identity as they settle into their new lives.[155]

More specifically, in order to better understand how the creators of *La Misma Luna* sought to attain commercial success for their movie on both sides of the border, one must first examine how they tried to appeal to at least three intended audiences.[156] The first one was clearly composed of middle and working class Mexicans *living* in Mexico, prime consumers of the melodramatic serials this movie is so reminiscent of. The peek that these non-immigrant spectators would then have into the painful adversity of undocumented migrants' lives evinces not only how migration to the United States has become a prevalent if disquieting part of the modern Mexican imaginary but also how it may be *comfortably* consumed within the Mexican middle class.

The opening scene of *La Misma Luna*, then, could be considered as a prime example of a voyeuristic exercise first promoted by the Mexican mainstream news media in its *nota roja*-style reporting of the social phenomenon of undocumented migration. It shows Rosario and her friend Alicia undertaking the by now hauntingly familiar "crossing scene," complete with the cold, almost overflowing river and the fear and abuse of La Migra. At this point, the Mexican audience who has never made the undocumented voyage is allowed a sigh of relief when the protagonist wakes up from the harrowing memory she was re-living in a dream, but these few minutes on

---

[155] Both the recent films *Maid in America* (2005) and *De Nadie* (2005) constitute good examples of how the representation of women migrants cannot escape its melodramatic aura even in the documentary genre, as the melodrama is often brought forth by the camera's emphasis on the desperation of their situation and their condition as *madres sacrificadas*. However, these documentaries will not be discussed at length here since they do not focus entirely on Mexican women migrants but more on Central Americans.

[156] As of March 23, 2009, out of *La Misma Luna*'s foreign box-office total of $10,451,369, Mexico had contributed with $9,576,437, for a worldwide total of $23,041,516. Source: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=underthesamemoon.htm>

screen have been more than enough to guarantee immediate identification through empathy. It is also noteworthy that this cultural consumption of undocumented-migration-as-melodrama by viewers who are not necessarily as marginalized as the characters portrayed in Riggen's movie, in some way gives these spectators the false impression of accessing hegemony, albeit from the back door. In a sense, Néstor García Canclini's observations on how soap operas, melodramatic movies (like *La Misma Luna*) and the mass news media transform structural events such as undocumented migration into personal tragedies support the idea that an audience not immediately connected with these events may find both empathy and a twisted comfort in viewing them from afar (*La Globalización* 28). Thus, this kind of visual texts show their morbid spectacles and at the same time maintain the illusion that these individuals —in this case, migrants— actually matter to those who gaze at them *desde la patria*.

The acceptance of the second target demographic of Riggen's movie —namely, Mexican moviegoers residing in the United States— is quite clearly pursued as well, particularly as the director herself admitted having them "in my mind as an audience."[157] Here is where the guest appearances of such immigrant icons as B-film director Mario Almada and the incredibly popular *norteño* band Los Tigres del Norte become so crucial in order to facilitate the desired identification of these viewers with the film. Another melodramatic convention, namely the casting of most of the *paisanos* as good guys, undoubtedly is meant to serve a similar purpose. But other factors are at play here, because while indubitably some migrants might want to see themselves reflected in their "star-quality" alter egos as a means of vicarious vindication for what is in actuality mostly an unforgiving life, others might not respond to this cinematic ploy. A small but relevant detail that may hamper the identification of the common *migrante* with the

---

[157] Source: <http://www.premiere.com/features/4465/under-the-same-moon-a-lunar-eclipse-for-a-young-director-page2.html>

majority of the protagonists is their rather inept mimicry of *norteño/fronterizo* accents and expressions, being that most of the cast comes from central Mexico.

Finally, there was an effort in *La Misma Luna* to reach out to audiences in the U.S. in order to alleviate fears of immigration, particularly by means of the seduction of Hollywood-style tear-jerking conventions. The achievement of this goal of enticement required a leap of faith that might have been too much to ask for spectators mostly accustomed to identifying with non-Latino heroes and heroines. Furthermore, the mostly negative portrayal of significant Anglo characters in the movie, from the ubiquitous Border Patrol agents to Rosario's neurotic boss, could not have helped.

As for Mexican-American viewers, there was definitely a more complex representation to behold in Riggen's film. On the one hand, the movie did make a point of explaining the motives of the two young Chicano siblings ―Marta and David― who end up playing a relevant part in the movie's storyline. Their role is to initiate Carlitos' quest as they try to smuggle him across the border after his grandmother dies and their purpose to do so is to get enough money to pay for college. However, they are detained while crossing the border and this failure brands them as fools. This outcome, coupled with the derisive way these young Chicanos are treated in Mexico by Carlitos' *coyote* boss, Doña Carmen, is just one illustration of the intricate and uneasy relationship between *mexicanos de aquí y de allá*. It is also a sign that the identification of Mexican-American spectators with the characters of Marta and David was not actually sought after in this film. Instead, there seemed to be the expectation that this particular Latino audience would achieve the desired empathy mostly because of the melodramatic plight of the protagonists Rosario and Carlitos. Moreover, the makers of *La Misma Luna* clearly presumed that their Mexican-American audience would have an emotional and cultural connection with the

movie's themes due to their ethnic background and thus made no sincere effort to have them actively identify with the characters, as was the case with the Mexican viewership.

Anyhow, it is apparent that the common thread that attempts to unite the diverse intended viewers of *La Misma Luna* depends by and large on the melodramatic standards of the plotline. To begin with, and after the initial dream/memory sequence, the film used back and forth takes that centered alternatively on Rosario and Carlitos as they readied themselves for their anxiously anticipated Sunday call. Any romantic comedy or *telenovela* follower would intuitively have an understanding of what these cinematic cues mean: that the separation between these lover-like figures will drive the narrative and that in the end, after facing numerous obstacles but also with the help of many kind outsiders, they will be reunited. The audience accustomed to the melodramatic structure that sacrifices *complexity* for the sake of *intensity* (Martín-Barbero, *De los Medios* 128) would then naturally expect the difficulties that the plotline will hand out to both hero and heroine in their quest to reach each other. Theses hurdles will include greedy relatives after Rosario's remittances to her son, the Border Patrol, an unscrupulous drug addict that almost succeeds in selling Carlitos, an — initially— unwilling travel companion and the hundreds of miles to cover before the hero can reach his goal of meeting his mother again. This journey of initiation has a parallel in Rosario's own troubles as she loses one of her jobs and briefly considers marrying Paco, a Mexican man "with papers" in order to obtain a legal status more easily. In a dramatic —but somewhat predictable— twist, just as she has decided that instead of going through with the wedding, she will return home to Carlitos, she is told that he has left Mexico to look for her after her mother's death. This climactic point of the movie, precisely when Rosario and Carlitos seem fated to miss each other, unsurprisingly results in a cathartic ending, which will more than satisfy the audience's expectations *de un final feliz*.

At this point, it seems worthwhile to reiterate the complete adherence of *La Misma Luna* to the structural patterns required by the modern *telenovela* in order to explain much of its cinematic focus on scores of obstacles that are almost miraculously removed from the hero's path. In doing so, this motion picture takes a stance and sides with the underdog in his struggle against the hegemonic forces that endeavor to keep him away from the ultimate melodramatic goal: his mother. The unbelievable (but melodramatically-compliant) situations that the film presents are always meant to promote a positive identification via the suspension of the spectators' disbelief. From Carlitos' narrow escape from being caught when crossing the border inside the seat of a van to the best-looking migrant workers' living quarters one could imagine, the point of such scenes is to make the migrant experience look hard without absolutely horrifying the viewers. After all, there is no place for the abject in such a true-to-form melodrama.

In this sense, the final scene closely follows the movie´s overall melodramatic scheme and thus functions as a recapitulation of its main themes: mother and son stare at each other from across the street, calling to each other anxiously as their most fervent desire is about to be fulfilled. The busy street then works as the symbol of all the hurdles they have had to overcome in order to be reunited but, at the same time, the self-control that both Rosario and Carlitos show in *not* immediately crossing symbolically forewarns of their successful adaptation to the conventions of the more restrained society that could then feasibly accept them as complying future citizens. At the point of maximum tension, when neither the spectators nor the characters can stand it any more, the "walking man" sign is lit, as if dictated by fate. This seemingly innocuous image —the last shot of the movie— can be seen as visually and metonymically representing the migrant population "on the move," possibly due to its resemblance to a

somewhat disturbing but now iconic road sign that was initially placed in the southern part of I-5 (near San Diego) in the 1990s and depicts a man, a woman and a child running.[158] The viewers in the know easily perceive that, at least in Rosario and Carlitos' case, that the intervention of the *deus ex machina* has saved the day for mother and child and concluded the film with the anticipated bliss. Furthermore, the street crossing that will finally rejoin Rosario and Carlitos completes *La Misma Luna*'s circularity, bringing the audience back to the other, "illegal" crossing that ultimately originated the film's plotline.[159]

The ending of Riggen's movie is constructed as a reward to the filial love of Carlitos but, equally important, as a tribute to the characterization of Rosario as an icon of Mexican motherhood of the *marianista* variety. The term *marianismo*, in obvious reference to the Virgin Mary, implies a conventionally Catholic vision of femininity, which emphasizes selfless maternity and sexual purity, but also alludes to "the cult of feminine spiritual superiority" (Stevens 3). This idealized representation can once more be connected —*in absentia*— in *La Misma Luna* with the opposing image of La Malinche, the supposed personification of female iniquity for Mexicans, particularly with regards to the visions that disparagingly portray La Malinche as a woman of loose morals. Furthermore, with the film's emphasis on Rosario's moral standards and *marianista* sacrifices for her son, it is assured that she will additionally comply with the melodramatic expectation of a victimized heroine that incarnates innocence and virtue (Martín-Barbero, *De los Medios* 129).

---

[158] See: <http://www.theworldinreview.com/images/Global%20Topics/Migrant_Crossing_Sign.jpg>

[159] I am indebted to Prof. Douglas Noverr for his comments on my presentation on this movie in PCA/ACA 2009.

Nevertheless, the question of Rosario as *the* object of desire of the film complicates what should be a typically straightforward portrayal of virginal perfection. This comes about because on the one hand, Kate del Castillo's character is occasionally rendered in a sexualized manner that ultimately works against her otherwise unquestionable embodiment of a Sara García-like perfect Mexican mother, a woman who must be "passive, resilient, resourceful and *asexual*, with no visible limits to either her goodness or her self-denial" (Berg, *Cinema* 59, emphasis mine). On the other hand —contrary to more traditionally patriarchal depictions of women— Rosario is undoubtedly unitiring and does manage to display certain agency throughout the film, never depending economically or emotionally on men. Both of these "minor impediments" to Rosario's otherwise flawless personification of *the* virtuous Mexican mother deserve to be regarded carefully.

To begin with, there is constant pressure on del Castillo's character to display a sexual availability that is ultimately unattainable. Rosario's sexualization is presented subliminally both in the casting choice of this particular fair-skinned, attractive actress, as well as in the producers' wardrobe choices for the character, a collection of form-fitting outfits that suggest her figure without being risqué.[160] The tantalizing sexualization of del Castillo's role is also written quite consciously into the script, as Rosario ultimately uses her good looks in order to assure her legal stay in the United States by agreeing to speedily marrying Paco, while expressing all the time that she is only doing it for Carlitos, so that she can bring him safely to the United States.

---

[160] Esteban Cárdenas, as the majority of Mexican film critics, has denounced Kate del Castillo's casting as a mistake both because of her attractiveness and her *telenovela*-style of acting: "es la primera sirvienta ilegal que veo que tiene implantes de senos, y su personaje es casi tan acartonado como cualquiera de sus actuaciones de telenovela." [She is the first illegal (sic) maid that I watch who has breast implants, and her character is as stiff as any of her acting in *telenovelas*.] Source: <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/diario/detalle/blog/bajo_la_misma_luna_es_el_equivalente_en_cine_de_taco_bell/140769>

Now, the fact that Rosario suddenly changes her mind and decides not to carry on with the wedding takes us back to *La Misma Luna*'s unyielding insistence in her role as a virginal mother —as all Mexican mothers *should* be in this idealized cultural imaginary. Yet, this character insists in stepping slightly away from its perfect motherly mold with her independent streak, exemplified by actions such as being a single mother, crossing the border without documents and distancing herself from previous and present suitors.[161] Ironically, it is her more "liberated" friend Alicia who insists that Rosario should give in to cultural expectations of female helplessness, as she tries to talk Rosario out of returning to Mexico and to Carlitos by "leaning on" Paco and responding to his romantic advances. So, when Alicia admonishes Rosario to "por primera vez en tu vida, deja que alguien te ayude a ti" ['for the first time in your life, let someone help you'], the film appears to advance its approval of women's "natural" and ultimate dependency on men. And while this seems to be the convincing argument that momentarily pushes Rosario into Paco's arms, one must not forget that in the end Rosario forgoes any sort of conjugal bliss so as to return to her most defining role as Carlitos' mother.

The question of this particular vision of self-sacrificing motherhood permeates all of *La Misma Luna*, going as far as hinting that it is the noblest justification for migration.[162]

---

[161] In fact, the lack of background information about Rosario's romantic history is rather revealing, as it plays with the myth of an "immaculate conception."

[162] A very different approach to the representation of a Mexican female migrant can be evaluated in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*, where all of the crowd-pleasing elements of Rosario's characterization are absent from the figure of the much suffering Amelia. The critically acclaimed *Babel* focused on Amelia's story —and therefore, on Mexico— as only a *third* of its overall thematic exploration of alienation. However, because this movie was so highly awarded (Cannes, Oscars and Golden Globes, among other prizes), any textual space devoted to these representations makes them worth detailing. One of the most noticeable characteristics of the depictions related to the underdeveloped scenarios where most of the film's actions take place —namely, Mexico and Morocco— is that they are routinely rendered as places filled with dangerous, unreliable people. And while this can probably be explained by González Iñárritu's

Accordingly, when Carlitos complains to Enrique, his travel companion, about his mother's original desertion of him, Enrique chastises him, reminding Carlitos of the harsh life he has lead in his few days as a migrant and noting that all those miseries are an intrinsic part of any migrant's experience, including Rosario's, who has suffered all those indignities solely to give Carlitos a better life. Enrique's words, as a monument to motherhood of sorts, are also a hardly disguised nod to the immigrant spectators as well as a tactic to gain the sympathies of the non-immigrant audiences on both sides of the border. For, as long as Rosario's focus continues to be on her son, she will be characterized as an admirable and brave woman, a migrant who can be safely recognized as a role model even by fellow immigrants such as Paco: "Hay que ser bien valiente para hacer lo que estás haciendo, Rosario." ['What you're doing takes courage, Rosario.']

This portrayal of Rosario as the ideal of the abnegated Mexican mother additionally sheds light on the film's moral views on other female migrants. Namely, Rosario's friend Alicia, not being a mother, is quickly placed into the "loose" Latina stereotype, although she varies from the usual Hollywood classification of a Latina harlot in that her amorous interests are Latinos, not Anglos (Berg, *Latino Images* 71). There are several opportunities that show Rosario's —and therefore, *La Misma Luna*'s— perspective on Alicia's choices regarding her sexuality, such as the mildly shocked look Rosario and Paco exchange as they watch Alicia go off with her very tattooed *rapero* date. More specifically, Rosario has already chided her friend for her assumed

---

goal of achieving the audiences' identification with a commonality of extreme human emotions, the movie ends up portraying a mostly hegemonic perspective of globalization as a site of *victimization* for women and children. I propose that in *Babel*, globalization is understood basically as the interconnectedness between world locations that the storyline thrives on. Thus, considering what seems to be a directorial decision to give more preeminence to a grander, artistic and *globalized* vision of transnational sites and situations, it is quite disturbing that the film does so by stereotyping gendered and national identities.

promiscuity: "ya estás tú para darle el vuelo a la hilacha por las dos, ¿no? ['you party enough for both of us']. This exchange is revealing since it is initially provoked by Alicia's questioning of Rosario's "rejection" of Paco's advances. Moreover, it is worthy of note that Alicia's reply to Rosario's admonition comes as a resolute defense of her right to express her sexuality, stressing that instead of judging her, Rosario should loosen up, which of course would be completely out of character for this "perfectly chaste" Mexican mother.

A final note on the representation of motherhood versus other gendered portrayals in this movie must draw attention to the contrast between this extremely traditional feminine depiction and what appears to be a changing Mexican masculinity, one which strays to some extent from the stereotypically *hardened* macho in both the figures of Enrique and Paco. These male characters allow themselves to show their emotions and even sacrifice their own aspirations for the sake of others, thus behaving in ways that might seem somewhat feminine, particularly if one considers common popular culture characterizations of "ideal" Mexican women and their stereotyped emotional and abnegated temperament. In *La Misma Luna*, Enrique, Paco and even Carlitos then function as prototypes of not only the "new" Mexican man but of *el nuevo migrante mexicano*: a model of a heroic, responsible, hard-working, sensitive and caring individual that not only embodies no threat to U.S.-American society but is also an ideal representative of a "kinder, gentler" Mexican nation.[163] Regrettably, this evolving gendered and national representation does not extend to the majority —not to mention the most important— of the

[163] Continuing with this representational trend, a very recent movie, *A Better Life* (2011), tells the story of a single father, a Mexican undocumented gardener, who strives to support his teenage son and keep him away from gangs in L.A. In *La Misma Luna*, the "new Mexican man" may even get his reward for his sensitivity: when Rosario decides not to go ahead with the wedding and Paco tells her to continue with the party as her farewell, we can assume that his "sacrifice" in the end wins her over, as she later seems to be more attracted to him than before (she asks him to dance and kisses him at the bus station).

female characters of *La Misma Luna*, who can only deviate to some extent from conventionally *feminine* stock portrayals. It is in this rather conservative imagery that Riggen's movie can be seen as complying with the notion that "melodrama persists as a discursive strategy to organize and support power —or to contest power imbalances" (Dever 8), for the visual narrative on the one hand supports patriarchal power with respect to its depictions of women but, on the other hand, the film's entire message also unequivocally questions the inequalities underlying the phenomenon of migration.

And while it is easy to appreciate how much the character of Rosario is firmly —and traditionally— grounded on its maternal side, the movie takes advantage of the emotional connection of its intended audiences with this suffering mother in order to put forward other key symbolic aspects of her portrayal. That is to say, *La Misma Luna* makes ample use of the empathy Rosario is bound to beget so as to associate her with a very definite ideal of national identity. Thus, in the movie there is an obvious (and careful) construction of a positive and acceptable *mexicanidad*, clearly meant to elicit a wider identification from viewers in both sides of the border.[164] Riggen's film repeatedly concurs with the 1909 Mexican antipositivists' quest

---

[164] The case of the "Mexicanness" displayed in *Babel* could not be more different from that of *La Misma Luna*. Firstly, both Mexico as a symbolic location and Amelia as a character are depicted as a risky proposition to all Anglos that interact with them. The viewer may not see this immediately, as the initial scene where Amelia and the two white children she cares for appear is a prototype of domestic tenderness. However, as soon as the Mexican nanny crosses the border with the children to attend her son's wedding, an atmosphere of menace is gradually constructed: from the chaos of the crossing to the various instances of a stereotyped barbarism at the wedding, complete with a gruesomely beheaded chicken, a raucous party and shots being fired to the air. The fact that Amelia is forced to take her wards Mike and Debbie as tag-alongs is preempted as a bad decision even as she repeatedly implies that she is doing it out of concern for them. And yet, all these good intentions will ultimately turn out to be futile, as Amelia's poor decision-making continues when she chooses to return to the United States with a very drunk nephew doing the driving. After he rashly jumps the border, Amelia and the children end up being abandoned in the desert at night. Even after admitting her stupidity to a terrified Mike, Amelia still makes another seemingly bad choice and leaves the children alone to look for help. Almost dehydrated

to "look at the world from a Mexican point of view in order to find and celebrate what was authentically Mexican" (Berg, *Cinema* 2). For example, the sight of Kate del Castillo eating a serrano pepper on a cracker for breakfast is an obvious wink to an audience "in the know," a gesture that is intended to assuage Mexican viewers' fears of the loss of cultural identity —the dreaded *malinchismo*— by living *del otro lado*.

Additionally, the melodramatic conventions that are prevalent in *La Misma Luna* contribute to the formation of popular narratives centered on *the* nation by bringing up questions of how changing concepts of national identity may be represented these days. In a similar manner as the movies of the "Golden Age of Mexican cinema" (the melodramas of the 40s and early 50s) taught *el pueblo* how to act and feel in a new urban modernity (Monsiváis, "Vino Todo el Pueblo" 68), movies like Riggen's could currently be educating its Mexican audiences about the sentimental and behavioral expectations of a new transnational modernity-in-migration. Consequently, the notion that popular genres such as melodramatic films and *telenovelas* participate and act as instruments of "the complex processes of Latin American modernization, nation-building and increasing transnationalization" could easily be supported (Lopez 257). In the case of Mexican migrants, it is clear that stories in the vein of *La Misma Luna* comment on social phenomena related to the construction of a modern Mexican imagery that expands considerably beyond *la frontera* precisely by giving cultural recognition to those who are increasingly forced into invisibility. However, in the particular instance of this movie,

---

by the time she is picked up by the Border Patrol, she is predictably and unmercifully deported, after having worked illegally for this family for 16 years.

its overall very "safe" and palatable representation of Mexicans has caused at least one film critic to claim that the movie is the cinematic equivalent of Taco Bell.[165]

Here, a brief observation on the wide range of critical opinions about *La Misma Luna* seems to be in order. While the harshest criticisms of the movie came from Mexican centrist, non-immigrant perspectives that have referred to this production in terms of "vulgar sentimentality," "narrative obviousness," and "prodigy of bipolarity," the estimation of the general Mexican and Mexican-American blogging community was mostly opposed to this view.[166] The sympathetic opinions of these ad-hoc critics ranged from commending it for its depiction of the "real" life and "sacrifices" of undocumented Mexicans abroad to praising the composition of its final scene and the talent of the actors.[167] In parallel with their counterparts south of the border, the more established film critics from the United States also commented unfavorably on the film's caricaturizing sappiness and melodramatic ploys in order to further a pro-immigrant political position.[168] However, not all opinions *de este lado* were adverse, as other critics pointed out that, while certainly being very predictable; the movie presented a storytelling which was sympathetic enough that it may have contributed to its significant box office success.[169]

---

[165] Source: <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/diario/detalle/blog/bajo_la_misma_luna_es_el_equivalente_en_cine_de_taco_bell/140769>

[166] Source: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/04/13/sem-tovar.html>

[167] For brief examples of the comments and blogs surrounding this movie, see <http://www.aollatinoblog.com/2008/03/28/la-misma-luna-rompe-record-de-peliculas-en-espanol/> and <http://www.cinexcepcion.com/la-misma-luna/2008/03/20/>

[168] Source: <http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=festivals&jump=review&id=2471&reviewid=VE1117932536&cs=1&p=0>

[169] Source: <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/same_moon/ >

And while there was not a substantial amount of favorable critical comments regarding the female lead in the movie —aside from those of the blogosphere fans— it must be noted that the casting of a well-coiffed and attractive actress to play the role of an undocumented migrant was unquestionably part of an effective strategy to sell the movie, a stratagem largely overlooked by critics.[170] Kate del Castillo's polished image thus served well in order to promote the desired identification of all sorts of Mexican moviegoers with her character, irrespective of their social class. On the one hand, Mexican bourgeois viewers would be able to identify more readily with a working class woman in a protagonist role firstly because of Rosario's light-skinned looks and almost imperceptible *norteño/fronterizo* speech patterns (which are usually considered to be more "rural" and/or "low class" by centrist elites). Additionally, the identification of middle-class audiences with the marginalized Rosario could also have been due to the movie's disregard of the underlying socioeconomic causes of migration, an omission that undoubtedly prevented any uneasiness in these spectators regarding poverty in Mexico.

On the other hand, *La Misma Luna* provided working-class moviegoers on both sides of the border with enough common cultural elements with del Castillo's character for them to be able to feel as if they shared an affinity with her. Moreover, Rosario's Europeanized good looks probably also worked as an idealized prototype that the "popular masses" could admire —in the fashion of many other Mexican *telenovela* stars— more so as she was on screen as "one of their own." As for U.S.-American audiences, the figure of Rosario was sufficiently easy on the eye to

[170] From the physical aspect of her casting to a solid and realistic performance as an actor, Adriana Barraza (Amelia) offered a much more believable interpretation of a Mexican undocumented woman than Kate del Castillo ever could. But then again, the intentions behind *La Misma Luna*'s choice of a female protagonist were very different from *Babel*'s overarching vision, as previously observed.

persuade them that she was *not* a threatening Other and hence worthy of being accepted as a positive movie heroine.[171]

It could be said that all of the aforementioned strategies used in *La Misma Luna* to put a likable, pleasant face on the people and situations surrounding the phenomenon of undocumented Mexican migration to the United States paid off in the end. In fact, Riggen's movie did much more to present Mexico and Mexicans as marketable cultural products through its astounding opening night box-office success than other, more critically acclaimed films by Mexican directors such as González Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón.[172] Not since *Como Agua para Chocolate* (1992), the most commercially successful Latin American movie in the United States, had there been such a serious —and fruitful— attempt from a supposedly "small" Mexican film to compete in a globalized market. This accomplishment cannot have been hurt by Riggen's casting of some of the best known Mexican actors and music

---

[171] Conversely, when thinking of all of Amelia's misadventures and errors in judgment, it may be hard to believe that her story in *Babel* is intended to shore up sympathy for undocumented migrants like her. The clearest means to furthering empathy for Amelia was her inescapable characterization as a victim, disregarded and ultimately abused by everyone who holds any power over her, from her employer to the immigration authorities to her own irresponsible nephew. And yet, possibly the most intriguing feature of Amelia's victimization is that it is intrinsically linked to the movie's overall representation of women as failed mothers, including Susan Jones and Chieko's dead mother. Ironically, the Mexican woman is the only one who actually performs any parenting tasks in the film. And while this could be interpreted as a sign of a potentially subversive positioning of the Spanish-speaking caretaker vis-à-vis the children of the dominant white male world, Amelia appears more consistently as a character *in absentia,* a desperate, ignored and culturally alienated victim of globalization. Thus, this character's fiasco as a maternal figure, plus the repeated manifestations of her lack of agency, both contrast markedly with Rosario's quasi-beatification as an ideal Mexican migrant mother.

[172] The weekend of its premiere, *La Misma Luna* grossed $2.6 million in the United States alone, breaking previous box-office records for any Spanish language movie in opening weekend. Source: http://www.aollatinoblog.com/2008/03/28/la-misma-luna-rompe-record-de-peliculas-en-espanol/. Furthermore, La Misma Luna opened on 266 screens. It also opened over Easter weekend in Mexico, where it grossed $1.7 million. Source: <http://spanish.about.com/b/2008/03/24/la-misma-luna-breaks-us-opening-weekend-record-for-spanish-language-cinema.htm>

stars on either side of the border. The question of how this previously unknown director managed to sign on such a recognizable cast and sell her first feature film at a record price for a Spanish-speaking movie is one that has been mostly overlooked by movie buffs, but that definitely signals an attempt to competitively "market" the Mexican immigration to the United States in a variety of fronts.[173]

Arguably, the most important one of these fronts for *La Misma Luna* was always the domestic one, understood as encompassing both sides of the border. And yet, this movie took a relatively fresh approach to its intended audiences by acknowledging the importance of the *mexicanos del otro lado* as consumers of Mexican cultural products. The most salient difference between Riggen's movie and other Mexican migrant-themed films of yesteryear such as *Espaldas mojadas* (1955) or *La jaula de oro* (1987) was that the homeland was not the object of nostalgia. In fact, in this case the mother/child dyad substituted for the nation as *the* object of desire, and thus the movie actually made the case for migrants to stay in the United States, and not necessarily to go back to Mexico. Indeed, even when Rosario states: "¿Qué de maravilloso tienen nuestras vidas? Corriendo de la Migra, viviendo en una cochera y lo peor de todo, siempre queriendo estar *en otra parte*" ['What's so wonderful about our lives? Running from la Migra, living in a garage and worst of all, always wanting to be *somewhere else*'][174] that *other* locus of longing is never a place but a person, her son. Consequently, Mexico ceases to be important when Carlitos and Rosario are reunited since there is not really a question in the storyline about the feasibility of returning. This is "allowed" in this very Mexican movie because after all, neither mother nor child have experienced a loss of "proper" Mexican identity that could

---

[173] *La Misma Luna* was sold to Fox/Searchlight in $5 million. Source : <http://proceso.com.mx/noticia.html?sec=7&nta=57765&nsec=Cultura+y+Espect%E1culos>
[174] Emphasis mine.

jeopardize the audience's identification with them and deem them as *malinchistas*, especially given that both have established their motives over and over as suitably Mexican: all for love of family.

3.3. *Las migrantes por escrito:* The post-malinchista journeys of La Malinche.

"Fue una tensión tan fuerte que sólo las personas
que lo pasamos lo podemos comprender"
['The anxiety was so intense that only those who have experienced it would understand']
(A. Alarcón 113).[175]

Amongst the thousands of stories in which the mass print media of both Mexico and the United States have featured Mexican migrants, it is unnervingly common —as is the case with the visual media— to find tales of extreme hardship and loss. Despite the suffering depicted in most of these accounts, the *voices* of immigrants generally come forth as no more than "sound bites" in the service of whatever larger point the reporter or commentator wishes to make. Moreover, when the immigrant speaking is a woman, it is even more likely that her words will be overlooked or deemed as a minor aspect within the overall scenario of Mexican migration to the United States.[176] This indifference towards migrant women's points of view in particular probably stems from the perception that migration is still a masculine endeavor, even while statistically Mexican women's migration has gone up to 42% according to the last U.S.-American census of 2002 (CONAPO 44).

Alicia Alarcón's compilation of testimonies, *La migra me hizo los mandados* (2002) plays a part in bridging the vast gap in the understanding of the experiences of Latin American undocumented migrants —both male and female— precisely because it is constructed on the basis of their own stories. Furthermore, the fact that nearly half of these accounts explore the personal narratives of women either from a first or a third-person perspective, significantly adds

[175] All references to Alicia Alarcón's compilation will be based on the original Spanish version but I will use the book's translation into English unless otherwise noted.
[176] In a search for "migrantes" in La Jornada's website, 20, 600 articles came up. The number of hits decreases to 2,500 if the search term is "mujeres migrantes." In The New York Times' website, there were 39,400 references to "Mexican migrants" and only 16,000 if the search term "women" was included (March, 2009).

to the contributions of these testimonies to the comprehension of the crucial, yet silenced, portrayal of Mexican migrant women. In the present analysis of this book, I will concentrate on four texts, titled “Unos Nachos para Llevar” [‘Some Nachos to Go’], “Luna de Miel en el Camino” [‘A Honeymoon on the Road’], “¡Bájeme, o lo Agarro a Cachetadas!” [‘Get me Down, Before I Slap you Silly!’] and “Me Vendió con el Armenio” [‘He Sold Me to the Armenian’]. These stories have been selected because they all have in common a distinctive approach to what undocumented border crossing means for *Mexican* women.[177] This approach entails the “radical” notion that these often undereducated migrant women are able to make their own individual voices heard and quite capable of delivering an insightful and nuanced social critique that reflects on issues of transculturation, socioeconomic inequalities, the imputation of illegality and the adversity of being rendered “invisible” in U.S-American society. Additionally, while an initial reading of *La migra*’s women-authored vignettes might find that the *malinchista* migrant does not appear as an overriding thematic concern in these accounts, it is nevertheless significant that the testimonies in themselves evoke the shadow of La Malinche in the *non-conformity* inherent to both these women’s acts of speech and to their crossing of borders.[178]

The relevance of the self-portrayal of women that is present in *La migra* is momentous considering the plethora of highly *mediated* depictions of *migrantes mexicanas*. As has been previously discussed, it is common for the mass news media on both sides of the border to describe migrant women using rather extreme images, which range anywhere from heroic

[177] Stories which center on Central American women migrants have not been chosen for this section because even as they share a cultural proximity to the narrations made by or about Mexican women, there are enough differences in their contexts, such as war being a prime motivator for leaving their countries, to make their analysis surpass the boundaries of the present study.

[178] This connection would clearly pertain to the more positive interpretations of La Malinche, where this translator is viewed as a trailblazing cultural border crosser.

mothers to invasive aliens. These excessive representations might be explained —at least from the viewpoint of the United States— by the need of the recipient country to exclude immigrants from the social body of the nation. On this note, Jonathan Xavier Inda observes how this segregation is 'justified for the greater good' by its perpetrators (135), who view "the body of the immigrant woman [in particular as an] object of ongoing surveillance and management" (Inda 151). Hence, the self-representation that women migrants accomplish in *La migra* becomes subversive in several fronts. To begin with, it escapes the scrutiny and control inherent to the stereotyped images produced by the mass media by countering these images with their own words but, perhaps more significantly, *La migra*'s self-representations allow for a space in which these women may become subjects with a voice, thus transcending the constraints of their portrayal as mere objectified bodies. In doing so, the stories that make up Alicia Alarcón's compilation insert themselves (if not perfectly) into a key 20th century Latin American literary genre: testimonial literature.

The stories compiled by Alicia Alarcón do follow certain important guidelines of the testimonial genre, which is why at this point; it may be opportune to discuss some of its most salient characteristics. To start with, *testimonios* are based on the use of first person accounts "by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts" and on the overall thematic of denouncement of human rights abuses, where there is a "urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, […] struggle for survival […] implicated in the act of narration itself" (Beverly 24, 26). In the case of *La migra*, this social critique mainly focuses on the traumas related to these women's crossing of the U.S.-Mexico border without documents, on the dire circumstances that force their migration and on the mistreatment and exploitation that they encounter *del otro lado*. In this manner, the 29 stories —13 of them written about or by

women— that make up this book attest to the unmitigated need of migrants to have a say in what is arguably one of the greatest social tragedies of the 21st century. The final and most controversial trait that would classify Alicia Alarcón's compilation as testimonial literature is the fact that, like Rigoberta Menchú's famous *testimonio* of the struggles of the Guatemalan indigenous people, the accounts comprised in *La migra* were also transcribed and edited "by an interlocutor [Alicia Alarcón herself] who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer" (Beverly 27).[179]

At the same time, *La migra* deviates in several respects from its better-known predecessors in Latin American testimonial literature. Firstly, the autobiographical narratives that constitute this text were put together through an invitation of Alicia Alarcón herself in her popular Los Angeles radio show.[180] That is, the migrants' stories did not initially originate from the narrators themselves as a *function* of their struggles or social grievances, as can be appreciated in other *testimonios* such as Domitila Barrios de Chungara's *Let Me Speak!* (1978) or Menchú's aforementioned *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983). And yet, the solicited origins of *La migra* are quite understandable, considering the risk that undocumented migrants face whenever they make themselves visible. A second atypical characteristic of Alicia Alarcón's compilation is that, unlike its more renowned precursors, the 29 stories that make up this book are not accompanied by any kind of lengthy prologue or explanation of how they were modified (if at all) before being printed. However, a close reading of the stories suggests that since the vignettes as a whole are more "understandable" in English, one may assume that there was not a significant amount of editing of a more colloquial or less schooled Spanish. This purposeful

[179] In the case of Menchú, the exact nature role of her compiler/transcriber Elisabeth Burgos-Debray has been much debated in academic circles (Beverly 32).
[180] Source: http://aliciaalarcon.com/biografia and back cover of *La migra me hizo los mandados*.

"ambiguity" with respect to the extent of Alicia Alarcón's editorial presence in *La migra* is quite striking in comparison with "*testimonio*'s seeming dependence on authenticity and the transparency of the transcriber [or the editor]" (Bartow 50). It may well be that Alicia Alarcón's position as a Mexican immigrant herself and as a journalist involved with championing for migrant causes sufficed to "authorize" her as a valid compiler, without her feeling the necessity of providing further clarification of her role in the manipulation of the texts.[181] A third aspect that differentiates *La migra* from other Latin American testimonials is that while Alicia Alarcón's compilation does touch on the collective experience of undocumented migration, the diverse narrators appreciably keep their own individualities and particular concerns throughout the text. This trait appears to be in opposition to the way in which *testimonios* usually show "the individual, first-person singular subject ("I") [being] replaced by the representative agent of a collective identity ("we")" (Maier 5). In other words, in *La migra*, the individual voices, while obviously being part of a collective identity as undocumented migrants, do not actually constitute themselves as a distinct "we," which makes for a more intricate and multi-layered text. Finally, in contrast with the considerable critical attention that *testimonio* as a genre has received in Latin Americanist academic circles, the scarcity of academic scrutiny of *La migra me hizo los mandados* as a cultural text seems, at least, suspect, particularly when considering not only its confluences and divergences from the much discussed testimonial literature, but also because of the immediacy of the social criticism put forth by it marginalized narrators.

---

[181] Nevertheless, it has been rightly pointed out that even when the intellectual "only" transcribes the text, the notion of organizing it for mass circulation, already makes it a cultural product *represented*, at the very least, by the scholar or journalist, in this case (García 52). However, since I believe it would be beyond the scope of the dissertation to attempt to ascertain the extent of Alicia Alarcón's influence in the text, I will analyze the narratives as they are and consider the narrators' words their own.

The complexity of the themes addressed in *La migra*'s critiques of the issues surrounding immigration may at first appear at odds with the modest educational background expected of undocumented migrants. And yet —as is the case with other subaltern *testimonio* narrators— the popular framing of their texts belies the elaborate nature of the insights contained in them, which deal with topics as varied and weighty as Mexican nationalism, the cultural authority of religion, the socioeconomic exploitation surrounding migration and the effects of transculturation. For instance, in the first —and the longest— of the selected vignettes, "Unos Nachos para Llevar," there is an important and astute condemnation of the hypocrisy of both the Catholic Church and the Mexican government, which are categorically construed as *the* hegemonic institutions in Mexico. Significant details such as the time setting of this tale on Mexico's Independence Day provide the reader with a symbolic criticism of an empty nationalism, while the protagonist's ponderings on her religious identity vis-à-vis the insincerity shown by her fellow believers reflects on the place of Catholicism in the Mexican imaginary on both sides of the border.

The story as a whole offers an unexpectedly lyrical perspective to an account that could easily have been plagued by commonplace scenarios of tragic poverty such as the small town where the migrant young woman —who is both narrator and protagonist of "Unos Nachos para Llevar"— comes from. In a manner reminiscent of the Golden Age *pícaros*, the protagonist (only identified as "Teresa" at the end of the vignette) recounts her saga of perils from her grandfather's home in Jalpa, Zacatecas to Los Angeles, where her mother and aunt live. In order to complete this journey successfully, this young woman must count on both her past beliefs and seemingly newly acquired abilities of trickery. Nevertheless, more than a straightforward narration of her (mis)adventures in order to get to the United States, Teresa's story is an intimate exploration of the emotional side of undocumented migration. At the core of this tale, there is an

unadulterated resentment which reveals the larger point of social criticism of this story-teller: "Un odio repentino me asaltó" ['A sudden hate welled up inside of me'] (A. Alarcón 35), as Teresa's anger is squarely directed towards the haves who seem impervious to the fate of the have-nots, therefore driving them to desperate measures such as undocumented migration.

Teresa's introspective gaze is firstly directed towards the Catholic youth group she used to belong to, as they fail to practice the charity they preach. And while the long prayers she is able to recite by rote do give her some solace, she is right to observe that they "no resolvían mi problema de dinero" ['they didn't solve my money problems'] (A. Alarcón 33).[182] Another set of familiar stimuli that provokes mixed emotions in this migrant centers on the Independence Day parade that is taking place the day she leaves Jalpa, since her nostalgic memories become entwined with the bitterness of departure.[183] As she leaves her town —presumably for the last time— having said a tearful goodbye to her best friend Rosi, the narrator is overcome by her hatred towards the rich, who she blames for the loss of her grandfather's lands and her forced migration. Here, the insight shown by this particular woman becomes noteworthy as she astutely observes, in her own words, the economic contradictions that surround the phenomenon of Mexican migration: "¿Cómo podía haber tanta abundancia y al mismo tiempo tanta miseria en mi querido México?" ['How could there be such wealth and at the same time such misery in my beloved Mexico?'] (A. Alarcón 36)

The narrator's sad reveries are interrupted by her arrival to the busy Guadalajara airport, where she is supposed to take the flight that will take her to Los Angeles. Here Teresa comes across the first of several humiliating encounters, this one with a disgruntled porter who insults

---

[182] Translation mine.
[183] This rather nationalist nostalgia is a common feature of Mexican migrant popular culture and it can be found anywhere, from songs to movies.

her for not giving him a large enough tip. The narrator's tribulations do not stop here as her hunger, or "un mandato divino" ['divine intervention'] (A. Alarcón 39), "corner" Teresa into duping a vendor in order to get free nachos. When the police detain Teresa, she explains her narrow escape essentially as a miracle in the form of an ongoing burglary that distracts the police officer long enough for her to run back into the airport and hurriedly board the plane. With these escapades, Teresa seems to be appealing to the magical resolutions that popular mysticism has commonly provided believers "no sólo en el orden de lo extraordinario, sino también en los ámbitos y actos cotidianos" ['not only in the order of the extraordinary but also in everyday areas and actions'] (Valenzuela Arce 205, translation mine). For the narrator of "Unos Nachos para Llevar," her success in matters of deception is reinterpreted to her own convenience simply as a question of faith: "la Justicia Divina, la misma que se había brincado a Jalpa, se hacía presente en Guadalajara" ['Divine Providence, the same that had forsaken Jalpa, revealed itself in Guadalajara'] (A. Alarcón 40). This personal syncretism of Mexican Catholicism is evidently one of the prime ways in which Teresa's text exemplifies its particular vision of cultural identity. It also shows how the narrator of "Unos Nachos para Llevar" is more than capable of subversively constructing her own understanding of religious dictates in order to accomplish her ultimate goal of reaching Los Angeles.

Once in the plane, the narrator's conscience momentarily bothers her because of her theft but not enough to fully distract her from her increasing hunger and the terror of severe air turbulence in this her first flight. Again falling back to her prayers, Teresa for the first time includes a specific request of protection in her standard invocations when she asks San Judas Tadeo [Saint Jude Thaddaeus], patron saint of desperate cases, to allow her to arrive safely to Los Angeles. While attempting to reach the airplane's bathroom, Teresa undergoes a quasi-

mystical experience as she imagines a strange glow enveloping the plane. Teresa promptly faints but when she comes to, the turbulence is gone and so are all her fears. As soon as she disembarks in the Los Angeles airport, Teresa resorts one more time to her religious "faith" to show her how to successfully bluff her way through Immigration. This rather picaresque conclusion of the story offers significant clues about the transformation of this young woman due to her experience of migration, especially when this originally naïve character claims to have begun to forget the parade that had touched her so, thinking only of the hot supper she will soon enjoy in the security of her new home.

In the end however, it is Teresa's private reinterpretations of public Catholic directives that better showcase this migrant's metamorphosis throughout her journey. Therefore, the protagonist follows what Marc Priewe views as the path of many migrants, for whom religion is "baggage" that is both transported and transformed by migration (584). Hence, all of the pious references over the course of Teresa's story would bespeak of an even more fundamental "conversion," as the protagonist increasingly appropriates the otherwise conventional prayers to support her ultimately fraudulent purposes, while justifying her exploits through her personal understanding of God as the God of the poor. This subaltern insight and "takeover" of the divine might be best expressed in Teresa's invocation of La Magnífica, particularly in the last verses she recites on the plane: "disipó el orgullo de los soberbios, desposeyó a los poderosos y elevó a los humildes" [He scattered the proud-hearted, He cast the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly] (A. Alarcón 43, translation mine). In many ways, then, Teresa's border crossing goes back full-circle, as the prayer's words seem to relate directly to her ultimate triumph over the socioeconomic disparity that provoked her migration in the first place.

The narrator/protagonist of the second selected account, "Luna de Miel en el Camino," can easily be perceived as being as initially ingenuous as Teresa. Nevertheless, her journey, as well as her reflections on her home country and her expectations of the place she is migrating to, could not be more different. This woman, identified as Fabiola at the end of her tale, firstly presents two sides of the ordeal of undocumented migration for Mexican women; that is to say, this story alludes both to the women who remain in Mexico when their families are separated by migration and to the women who migrate to the United States with their relatives in what has been termed "family unit migration" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 79). Fabiola thus includes these opposing experiences in her vignette by contrasting the feelings of abandonment of her aunts that stayed behind in Guanajuato when their husbands left for the United States with her own experience as a young woman who follows her newfound husband to "the other side." A second noteworthy feature of her chronicle is her candid reflection on what her 'imagined' destination will be like, even if she admits this picture has been utterly influenced by representations originated in the U.S.-American mass media. Finally, as an interesting counterpoint to the spirituality and the longing embedded in Teresa's story, the narrator of "Luna de Miel" —an avid admirer of U.S.-American pop culture— presents a more materialistic approach when she confesses to her dreams of the monetary benefits and the idealized standard of living she envisions she will have when she is finally *del otro lado.*[184] And while these aspirations should suffice to "taint" Fabiola as a foreign-loving Malinche, there is no apparent concern in her account that she will be accused directly or indirectly of *malinchismo*, a significant aspect to be kept in mind in this analysis.

[184] Another vignette that comments on completely materialistic motivations for Mexican women to migrate up North is the brief "Los del Norte Llegan muy 'Pispirisnais'," or "Everyone from the North Shows Up Looking 'All Fly'."

Considering the protagonist's starry-eyed expectations of her new life in the United States, it is rather ironic that Fabiola's narration begins by detailing the initial adverse feelings that she used to have towards marrying someone who lived north of Mexico. Unlike her female relatives —Mexican Penelopes of sorts— this romantic young woman had long ago decided that waiting was not for her. This makes Fabiola's hasty and impulsive wedding to a magnetic man who has recently returned from Los Angeles looking for a wife seem very much like part of a *telenovela* script. Certainly, from this point onwards, the undertakings narrated in "Luna de Miel en el Camino" will mostly adhere to previously discussed melodramatic structures that require for certain unbelievable situations and reversals of fortune to appear in the plotline.

The first one of this setbacks occurs when Fabiola and her new husband travel to Tijuana, a place she has imagined as a "metrópolis llena de rascacielos de cristal. Sus calles limpias y ordenadas. Debía ser por su cercanía con Estados Unidos" ['metropolis full of glass skyscrapers, its streets clean and orderly. This is the way it must look because of its proximity to the United States'] (A. Alarcón 88). Alas, Tijuana turns out to be a sordid and miserable dump, complete with homeless children and cardboard houses. Nevertheless, this initial letdown does not discourage the narrator too much at that point, as she holds on to her quite defined mental picture —straight from her *Reader's Digest*— of what the United States and its people will *surely* be like:

> Las imágenes no mentían. Un país de gente bonita, bien vestida, una vida de comodidades. Ahí debía vivirse muy a gusto porque pueblos enteros emigraban para allá. [Pictures don't lie. It's a country full of beautiful, well-dressed people, a life full of comfort and convenience. People must live very well there because entire towns have emigrated there] (A. Alarcón 89).

At this point, the absence of nostalgia for the homeland, as well as the construction of the imagined destination as an object of *desire* can be readily noted as the main differences between Fabiola's and Teresa's stories. Moreover, Fabiola's dream-like representation of the United States illustrates the encroachment in the Mexican imaginary of what Néstor García Canclini has called "transnational cultural referents" which, without much difficulty, position even the most marginalized migrants as consumers of a globalized popular culture and enthusiastic defenders of the marketed images they believe to be true (*Consumers* 30).

And yet, the indignities of the journey described in "Luna de Miel en el Camino" are so exacerbated that even Fabiola's fervent beliefs in the beauty, glamour and orderliness that await her across the border falter when confronted by the reality of an arduous crossing by foot, through treacherous terrain and in strenuous conditions of fatigue and hunger. These grueling misadventures, as Fabiola observes, appear to be quite commonplace in the border. Along with other thirty undocumented migrants, Fabiola and her husband end up dragging themselves through an open field only to be captured and humiliated at the hands of the Border Patrol. After being deported back to Tijuana, the protagonists attempt another crossing with a younger *coyote* who guides them through cliffs, mountains and drainage pipes. Exhausted and nauseated, the narrator is sufficiently disappointed to question the mass media source of her earlier fantasies:

> '¿Por qué nada de esto pasa en la televisión?' Pensaba. Tampoco nadie lo platica. […] Empecé a sospechar que también la televisión me había mentido. ['Why doesn't any of this happen on television?' I wondered. No one ever talks about it, either. […] I began to suspect that the television had lied to me, too] (A. Alarcón 94).

Considering the faith that Fabiola has deposited in her Gospel of TV and the way it has affected not only her perception but her life-changing decisions as well, Fabiola's questioning of the

media at this point in the narration appears to be rather shrewd. However, this particular insight is quite short-lived. When their coyote manages to direct them successfully through the night until they reach Chula Vista, the narrator feels rewarded for all her efforts, as she is able to sincerely admire her new surroundings from the front seat of a car, while her husband is hidden in the trunk. Singing a Bee Gees song which appears to have become the soundtrack of her quasi-picaresque ordeal —tellingly, "If I can't have you"— Fabiola ponders her future:

> Atrás había quedado lo feo, lo grotesco, lo maloliente. Me esperaba la luna de miel con el marido que viajaba en la cajuela. [Behind me were the ugly, the grotesque, and the malodorous. I looked forward to finishing my interrupted honeymoon with my husband who was riding in the trunk] (A. Alarcón 95).

Ultimately, it may very well be that Fabiola's somewhat Anglicized background is precisely her most useful piece of baggage, as it offers her the possibility of *denial* as a strategy for relocation into her own American Dream. For, as long as the protagonist of "Luna de Miel en el Camino" chooses to conveniently forget the horrors of undocumented migration, her transculturation, defined "as a combination of sameness and difference, in which certain elements merge without assimilating and others remain juxtaposed" has more chances of being completed successfully (Priewe 587). Nonetheless, it is still remarkable that the elements that are more likely to remain unchanged in Fabiola's cultural identity come more from globalized popular culture than from other stereotypically Mexican cultural markers such as *ranchera* songs or longing invocations of the homeland. In many ways, then, Fabiola reenacts her own version of the Malinche myth, but from a position of relative empowerment that is derived from feeling no shame for her enthusiastic and obvious appreciation of foreign ways.

In an almost opposing vein, the starting phrase of "¡Bájeme, o lo Agarro a Cachetadas!"[185] immediately refers to "mi México querido," in what is undoubtedly the most biographical of these women-authored accounts selected from *La migra*. Additionally, this is also the only vignette that features the experience of undocumented crossing through the eyes of an older woman, Iginia, who insists throughout her story that the only motive for her crossing is to be with her children, at *their* insistence.[186] This very Mexican leitmotif of a mother making enormous sacrifices for her family —in this case, all the hardships of her migration— actually masks Iginia's most likely narrative intentions to prominently feature her own individual biographical recollections, which are allotted a significantly greater textual space than the border-crossing journey itself.

This is not to say that, like the previously discussed stories of *La migra*, "Bájeme" does not deal thoroughly with the actual experience of the undocumented journey. In fact, the risks that the narrator of "Bájeme" faces while crossing the border with a *coyote* are complicated both by the presence of her niece, "que era señorita" ['who was a virgin'][187] (A. Alarcón 112) and by her own unnamed physical challenges [her age, her level of fitness?] which ultimately make them to go "the long way." As a matter of fact, the humorous title of this short story alludes to the obstacles that force them to take a detour: as Iginia becomes stuck while crossing the border fence *and* her niece's purity must be protected at all costs, there is no question of them being separated; therefore Iginia loudly demands that the coyote help her down the fence immediately and thus they must start their long walk around the fence. This comical scenario in reality

---

[185] The title will be abbreviated to "Bájeme" from now on.
[186] While this motivation is reminiscent of Soledad Reyes in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo* (2002), it is important to note that while Soledad does migrate to the United States to be with her family, the migration itself is not central to Soledad's character, as is the case in this non-fiction account.
[187] My own translation.

underscores a significant matter that is amply addressed in “Bájeme,” namely, the cultural restrictions that Mexican women face as a result of the expectations that patriarchal society has of their behavior.

These patriarchal constraints appear abundantly in Iginia’s narration of her life but in this initial segment of her account, Iginia focuses on the —by now— familiar misadventures that undocumented migrants face in this sort of trip: the hiding, the running in the dark, the crawling, the fear. And while the calamities of the journey seem to be suffered collectively, there is also space for a shared solidarity within this marginalized group. This spirit of cooperation is exemplified in “Bájeme” when other migrants help Iginia and her niece out both when the older woman twists her ankle and when a group of men tries to rape the young girl. Alas, despite the Good Samaritans, the women’s misfortunes do not end there, as the Border Patrol detains them and deports them —twice—. All of these ill-fated episodes ultimately support the popular representation of the event of crossing itself as an inherently dangerous experience, particularly for women. Indeed, the passage of the U.S.-Mexico border already appears to have become a site of trauma in the imaginary of future and past undocumented *female* crossers, in their case mainly due to the probable threat of sexual assault.[188]

Even though this menace does not materialize in the end for the women of “Bájeme,” the account as a whole does take a turn towards the dramatic when the narrator is bit by a poisonous animal and almost dies. In the delirium caused by the venom, Iginia reminisces about her

---

[188] In this respect, Sylvanna Falcón argues that the most patent factors that contribute to the menace of border violence for women are “the interconnections between militarism, hyper-masculinity, colonialism and patriarchy” (203). And yet, while it must be highlighted that Falcón’s study only refers to the abuses of Border Patrol agents, one must note that both in “Bájeme” and in the subsequent story, the allusions to the sexual abuse of women and its underlying causes support the image of the border as a site of particular peril for *mujeres migrantes*.

toilsome life as a little girl living in the countryside with a cruel stepmother and a surrounding tradition of machismo. At this point, the reader can appreciate the deftness of this undereducated narrator in steering her *testimonio* towards "textualizing a story that otherwise might have been forgotten, repressed, or silenced" (McClennen 67). Iginia therefore subversively takes control of her own text as she recounts the myriad indignities of a childhood spent grinding the corn to make tortillas by hand, washing the clothes of the entire family and being subjected to beatings and scoldings. When she is but eight years old, Iginia even contemplates committing suicide when she overhears her stepmother planning to sell her off to a strange man. Iginia's father, a widowed peasant, stops her from ingesting rat poison and after hearing her story, promptly kicks the wicked stepmother —if only for a short while— out of the house.

Iginia drifts in and out of consciousness as she continues to recall harrowing incidents from her past, such as the time when one of her cousins tried to rape her or her father's fierce opposition to her wedding to her first boyfriend. Here, it is worth noting how Iginia's recollections purposefully highlight seemingly archaic situations such as her ex-boyfriend's failed attempt to "steal" her as a bride or her father's threats of killing her would-be husband if they eloped. And yet, on the one hand these memories not only construct a believable —and quite *machista*— reality within the context of Mexico's rural areas but they also serve as a meta-commentary on the limitations that patriarchy may impose on women's life-choices. On the other hand, the reminiscences of Iginia's youth help to promote her depiction as a traditional, abnegated, *good* Mexican woman who is willing to give up her personal happiness for her family's well-being, reminding us of Rosario in *La Misma Luna*.

This trend of self-sacrifice continues in the narrator's later years, when after having been abandoned by her migrant husband, Iginia must work to support her family. Much later, when

her children migrate to the United States as well, they beg her to join them. Iginia initially refuses, but being the abnegated mother that she portrays herself to be, she reconsiders, as "el amor por ellos fue más grande que mis miedos y mis angustias." ['my love for them was stronger than any of my fears or my anxieties'] (A. Alarcón 119). As Iginia's memories return to her children, her original motive to migrate, she awakens in a hospital in the United States and her brief but moving autobiography comes back full-circle. Like a mythical phoenix, Iginia is born again into her new life, surrounded by her family, *del otro lado*.

The last selected narration from this book, "Me Vendió con el Armenio,"[189] bespeaks of emotional and economic exploitation on both sides of the border although the ending very clearly suggests the transformative power of regained dignity. In the beginning of this tale, María, the narrator, evocatively and metaphorically summarizes the context behind her undocumented migration:

> Había tomado la decisión de cambiar el país de los atoles, de los tamales, de los chilaquiles, por el de los Taco Bell y las hamburguesas. [I had made the decision to exchange my land of *atole*, tamales and *chilaquiles* for a nation of hamburgers and Taco Bell] (A. Alarcón 120).

The relevance that the protagonist confers to such an emotionally charged cultural marker as food while explaining the motivation underlying her crossing is quite notable. Coming from an underprivileged background and an abusive home environment, María seems to substitute more common symbols of nationalist nostalgia —such as the exalted Mexican family or the abandoned hometown— with others that actually provide her with material and psychological sustenance. At the same time, by choosing fast food as the primary representation of the country she is

---

[189] The abbreviation "Me Vendió" will be used from now on to refer to this title.

migrating to, the narrator of “Me Vendió” also manages to portray the United States as somewhat soulless and alienating.

After arriving to Chula Vista under the seat of a van, María observes her orderly and neat new surroundings, while she lucidly criticizes the country she left behind: the disorder of Tijuana, the corruption of Mexico City, the hypocrisy of ultraconservative Guadalajara. Alas, for the greater part of this story, the narrator’s views on her experiences in the United States will be as unfavorable as those she holds regarding her homeland. To begin with, María is made to work as a maid for the coyote who helped her cross. One night, this man tries to rape her. And while she manages to fend him off, she is “given away” and sold to an Armenian man in Santa Ana who makes her work basically as an indentured servant. Sadly, this inhumane situation is nothing more than a reflection of what her life in Mexico had been like: psychologically abused by her mother, abandoned by an alcoholic father and always made to feel worthless.

And yet, María’s story is ultimately one of empowerment. The protagonist experiences a gradual metamorphosis and, after many months of mistreatment, manages to regain some of her dignity and makes a first attempt to walk out on her employer. She spends the night in a street that transforms itself from luxurious to miserable until the Armenian’s wife finds her and brings her back, now as a paid maid. María works there for another year, but she flees that house for good for fear of being sexually abused by her employer, Mr. Mike. Having found another job, the narrator stays in the United States for a total of four years, in which she embodies “the paradox of the ‘*undocumented worker’ – needed to service lower rungs of the economy, but criminalized, forced to go underground, rendered invisible*” (Brah 627).[190] This particular representation put forth in “Me Vendió” is important because it is the only selected account from

[190] Italics in original.

La migra to discuss the final —and most likely— result of undocumented migration: the conditions of "illegality" and invisibility that so many Mexican men and women must live with after fulfilling their basic goal of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Me Vendió" is also unique in that the protagonist does not only narrate one border crossing, but two. Longing for her family, one day María decides to visit her mother in hopes that she has changed her attitude towards her, but to no avail: her mother is still insulting and Mexico City is more chaotic than she remembers. María then realizes (following the footsteps of La Malinche?) that she prefers her "foreign" life and would rather return to the "orderliness" of the United States. Sadly, the narrator's journey is as full of setbacks as the rest of her account. While trying to cross with a Salvadorian man, they are firstly subjected to the corruption of the Mexican police, who momentarily arrests them in order to get a bribe. Their second hurdle comes in the form of the crossing itself, as it rains constantly upon their long walk, to the point that the young man collapses in exhaustion. María, repeating a stereotyped patriarchal tenet, chides him to continue: "—¿Te vas a rajar? Los hombres no se rajan" ['Are you going to give up? Real men never quit] (A. Alarcón 127). And yet, in the end, even if her words appear to illustrate her adherence to traditional gender roles, the narrator's actions bespeak of a certain defiance to patriarchal expectations of meek and helpless women, since it is she who makes the young Salvadorian to continue and even after they are captured and humiliatingly deported by la Migra, it is María who accomplishes a successful crossing to the United States on her own. On this second attempt, she walks all the way to San Diego, where she begs for enough money to buy a train ticket to Los Angeles. Once in the train, a Border Patrol agent asks for documents of all the passengers, which is when the reader can appreciate the radical change that has taken place in María's self-assurance:

> había reunido todo el valor que no tuve antes. El valor que me hizo falta para reclamarle a mi madre por sus insultos, […] el valor para desenmascarar a Mr. Mike. Lo junté todo […] para decirle, […] —*American Citizen.* [I found the courage I had lacked all along. The courage to stand up to my mother's insults, […] the courage to expose Mr. Mike. I gathered it all up and used it to […] say, 'American citizen'] (A. Alarcón 128).

This deceitful statement represents quite clearly for María, the most transcendental moment of her narrative, if not her life. Symbolically addressed to the people whose abuse has scarred her most, this declaration may also be interpreted as María's final stance against cross-border exploitation —both psychological and socioeconomic. Furthermore, María's false assertion of belonging to *the* hegemonic nationality can be read as much more than a ruse to remain in the country.[191] The significance of María's words then lie not only in the radical implications of a female migrant taking control of her life by rejecting previous patterns of submissiveness in the face of mistreatment but in the refusal of a marginalized group —here represented by the protagonist of "Me Vendió"— to be collectively discounted and derided. Lastly, María's impersonation of U.S.-American citizenship can also be understood as positioning her as a deserving avatar of La Malinche, from the perspective of her apparent disavowal of her Mexican identity and her adoption of an "alien" one.

And while clearly none of the other female protagonists in the pieces chosen from *La migra me hizo los mandados* have the opportunity to "disown" their Mexicanness as explicitly as María does in "Me Vendió," it is also true that their stories have more in common with each other and with a possible *malinchismo* than can be appreciated at first glance. To begin with, the majority of the narrators hold an idealized vision of the United States —at the very least as the

[191] The fact that María's affirmation of American citizenship is all it takes for her to continue her journey without any problems effectively dates this text in a pre-9/11 world.

much desired goal they want to reach in their migration— which is not thoroughly challenged within the narratives themselves. One of the reasons behind the prevalence of an uncontested romanticized destination appears to be that the narrative focus is directed more towards the perils of the crossing than any other theme. In this sense, the readers of *La migra* become rapidly aware that the humiliation and the near-post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) associated with undocumented border travel are important leitmotifs of this text. Another common, presumably *malinchista* aspect of these narrations is that in them, the image of Mexico and its cities —particularly Tijuana— is mostly degraded, conjuring images of fear and abjection. Nevertheless, the narrators of the selected stories of *La migra* are decidedly indifferent about trying to counter any possible accusation of *malinchismo* in their texts. It would appear then that the specter of La Malinche, traditionally wielded by more hegemonic cultural mediators to regulate the behavior of Mexican women vis-à-vis foreign influences, does not really play a part in the self-representation of these female migrants who have more pressing concerns to address in their narratives. In other words, the suggested *malinchista* accusation ever-present in *Bread and Roses*, as well as its contrary portrayal illustrated in *La Misma Luna*, have no place in the themes that are more relevant to the women of *La migra*.

Indeed, amongst the apprehensions most commonly expressed in the chosen texts, the matter of settlement holds a definitively greater importance to Alicia Alarcón's narrators than the question of whether they are acting as "proper" Mexican women or as traitors to a still nebulous expectation of a national and gendered identity. Accordingly, even while all the stories provide a personal background to the women's migration, only one of them —Iginia's— devotes substantial textual space to a reflection of the past. By looking forward, towards a new life, these accounts appear to confirm Avtar Brah's statement that "diasporic journeys are essentially about

settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'" (616).[192] In the rather insightful manner displayed by the women of *La migra*, the emotional associations connected with settling in the United States are characteristically multifaceted, ranging from expressions of unquenchable hope and optimism to bleak descriptions of their profound disillusionment with a cherished expectation, typically pertaining to the way they had hoped to be treated on either side of the border. And while this makes for somewhat somber narrations of self-reflection, certain doses of (un)intentional humor can also be found in the greater part of these stories. This variety of humor, oftentimes on the dark side, along with the realistic tone emblematic of *testimonio* which is found extensively throughout *La migra*, constitute the most salient formal aspects which effectively distinguish this work from true migrant *melodramas*.

Nevertheless, the feature that makes the auto analyses in *La migra* genuinely distinctive as texts is the empowering and extremely rare self-expression of migrant women's voices in print. Reaching far beyond the verbal transgressions of the mythical Malinche, these *mujeres migrantes* dare to cross cultural and physical frontiers, translate their experiences to a wider audience and, above all, testify to one of the greatest human migrations of this century. In doing so, the allegedly unmediated accounts transcribed by Alicia Alarcón stand for a different kind of challenge to the status quo, an act of defiance that provides a much needed space for the emergence of more subaltern, *speaking* representations that may be positively contrasted to the more mediated and more stereotyped narratives that keep increasing their popularity within the imaginary of the US-Mexico border.

---

[192] The difference between the terms diaspora and migration seems to be a matter of perspective, as it is commonly acknowledged that diasporas (the Jewish case being the most prominent one) are forced while migrations (such as the Mexicans journeying to the United States) are voluntary. However, the lack of options available to those populations who migrate primarily due to poverty—still the major push factor for Mexicans— must be considered when reflecting on the "voluntary" nature of migration.

3.4. La mujer migrante or, *Malinche reloaded*.

Aliens, *desarraigadas*, invaders, *malinchistas*, abnegated mothers, migrant women. It is clear from the astounding variety of images of Mexican women who cross into the United States without documents, that an organizational principle of their portrayals —such as the emblematic figure of La Malinche— can be very useful for their study, as long as it is viewed as a critical tool open to variability and questioning. The specific value of referring to La Malinche in this context can first be assessed when discussing the subject of cultural identity in reference to the representation of migrant populations. On this issue, scholar Luis Villoro theorizes that minorities —such as Mexican immigrants in the United States— tend to prioritize the preservation of their "own identity," sometimes by means of an excessive reaffirmation of their culture of origin and other times by creating a *new* image that contrasts dramatically with that which the hegemonic power has attributed to it (27). Here is where the "monstrous double" of Malinche and Guadalupe that Norma Alarcón has alluded to, comes back in full force (61), particularly when considering both the traditional cultural traits embedded in the character of a self-sacrificing, virginal mother such as Rosario in *La Misma Luna* or the variations in the *neo*-Malinche portrayals found incipiently in *Bread and Roses* or, more conclusively, in the testimonies of *La migra*.

Nonetheless, the question of cultural imagery is not the only representational issue that must be considered with respect to the depictions of Mexican female migrants. From a feminist viewpoint, the insistence on a stereotypical conception of motherhood as the ideal gendered option for *migrantes mexicanas* becomes even more problematic when it is compounded with hegemonic expectations that come from nationalistic points of view. From the perspective of those U.S.-Americans who hold chauvinistic, anti-immigrant positions, the portrayals that

emphasize a patriarchal model of a brown motherhood render an extremely racialized scenario of domesticity that paradoxically fosters both an aura of invisibility of these women in mainstream U.S.-American society as well as the ghost of a "lurking menace" of Mexican reproduction and acculturation.[193] As for the Mexican side, the images based on a melodramatic, self-sacrificing motherhood such as the one illustrated in *La Misma Luna* actually promote stereotyped and hegemonic notions of a "proper" *mexicanidad para mujeres*, all the while deliberately avoiding any reference to the symbol of the subversive Malinche, who, far from embracing the abnegated joys of maternity, thus becomes the epitome of the independent, "foreign-loving," border-crosser. And yet, *la marca de La Malinche* persists when it comes to Mexican migrant women, whether it be in depictions which obtain their *malinchista* association due to their partiality towards supposedly non-Mexican ideals —like Maya in *Bread and Roses*— or merely because of their acts of cultural translation —as can be appreciated in the narrators in *La migra*.

In the problematic intersection of *maternidad y malinchismo*, Norma Alarcón further explains why the representations associated with La Malinche could be viewed so disapprovingly: "Because Malintzin the translator is perceived as speaking for herself and not the community [...] she is a woman who has betrayed her primary cultural function — maternity" (35). And yet, those female migrant characters more closely aligned with a Malinche-like figure may instead be redefining those feminine roles of cultural preservation, in fact expanding them as their communities can be increasingly visualized as fluid, transnational webs of social connections and less as homogeneous, "solid" national blocks. Therefore, the portrayals of *migrantes-mexicanas*-as-Malinches may one day come to symbolize the transformation and the defiance of traditional cultural and gendered expectations for Mexican women purely by virtue

[193] These ideas underpin the political commentary of a range of U.S.-American media figures, from far-right Pat Buchannan to CNN's Lou Dobbs and CBS's Katie Couric.

of their *crossing*, particularly since it represents a (dis)placement which symbolically ignores the old accusation of treachery as a vestige of a male-dominated society that is to be left behind.

Chapter 4. Migration and women in Mexico or, *la que espera, desespera.*

In contrast with the attention that the mass media of both Mexico and the United States have granted to the phenomenon of immigration *al Norte*, there does not seem to be a comparable interest in the effects experienced by the Mexican communities that the migrants have left behind. Nevertheless, the most recent statistical data on this topic does attest to the existence of quite meaningful consequences for the places where this northbound migration originates. To begin with, there is a significant difference in the ratio of men to women —approximately 84 men to every 100 women— in what have been termed "sending" states, particularly in the intermediate age groups (30-59 years old).[194] The Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI in Spanish), responsible for census information in Mexico, has interpreted these statistics as caused by male migration, whether this may be internal or international (*Mujeres y Hombres* 8). That is to say, the migration of men is more noted in the larger numbers of women with respect to men, regardless if the men have migrated to the United States or within Mexico. Moreover, the specific regions of Mexico from which men traditionally migrate, such as the states of Michoacán, Oaxaca and Guanajuato, also tend to be locations where an important percentage of their population can be found in small communities —under 2,500 inhabitants (INEGI, *Mujeres y Hombres* 471). To complete this picture, the difference between men and women who work outside of the home is greatest in these sparsely populated areas, with 81.3% of men working while only 28.5% of women do so in these rural districts (INEGI, *Mujeres y Hombres* 290).

The main implications of this data for the present study lie in how this information sets the foundations for a characterization of rural Mexican women touched by male migration to the

[194] Source: <http://cedoc.inmujeres.gob.mx/documentos_download/100976.pdf>

United States, opening the door to imagining scenarios that try to explain what happens in the lives of these women when the men leave. Are they envisioned as deep in despair since they are not used to extradomestic work? Or are they pictured as finally liberated from patriarchal mores that only allow men to be household providers? Whether the aforementioned figures depict images of *female* abandonment and possible victimization or, rather, of *feminist* independence and empowerment depends to a great extent, on the perspectives held by both producers and consumers of any text that deals with this globalized situation. Therefore, one must consider that cultural texts put across the reality that pre-exists before them but also contribute to the reality where they are consumed by playing a part in configuring the subjectivity of the people who make use of them (Storey 137). Keeping this in mind and examining the rather scarce representations of women in Mexico who have been affected by migration, one can observe that there are at least two significant opposing forces that play a part in the creation of these characterizations.

On the one hand, the portrayal of the women "left behind" in these rural settings may easily respond to nationalistic and patriarchal discourses that construct them as the domestic pillars of the Mexican family and society, a society that asserts "the moral superiority of local traditions […] against the agringado customs of the migrant" (Fitzgerald 151). These customs, then, would be embodied most conveniently through depictions that favored conservative feminine ideals of sacrificed mothers and "decent" wives, modeled after the beloved Mexican paragon of feminine virtue, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Furthermore, within the context of globalized migration, the representations of Mexican women who remain in their country necessarily interact with the concept of nation itself. On this matter, Carlos Monsiváis has argued that as *mexicanidad* actually becomes more complex, national identity will confine itself to

essentialized formulas, meaning that "traditional" family structures and communities will thus root themselves more firmly in the national imagination ("La Identidad Nacional" 300). Consequently, Mexican women who do not migrate with their loved ones can conveniently be construed as conservative defenders of national authenticity, as long as they comply with expectations that confine them to the household.

On the other hand, the women who stay in Mexico can also be represented from the perspective of their potential for feminist subversion. This potential can be particularly realized as the absence of men may strengthen their strategic gender interests (against female subordination and for equality) in place of more practical gender interests (more aligned with patriarchal conventions) when the men are there to control the family unit (Vaughan 13). This confrontation of interests is already a constant in the portrayal of Mexican women and it is quite understandable that the occurrence of migration would exacerbate this tension. The two works that have been selected for analysis in this chapter focus on the paradoxes inherent to this second depiction as it necessarily dialogues with the first.

From the Mexican side of this equation, *Mujer on the border* was first presented as a monologue in a couple of venues in Mexico City in 2005. Adapted by María Muro and Marta Aura from an award-winning play, the plot addressed the solitude that Mexican women face when their loved ones migrate to the United States, as well as the family disintegration that ensues.[195] More specifically, this play focused on the ordeal of a Zacatecan mother who learns that her son has been sentenced, after a seven-year trial, to the death penalty in the United States. The gendered ambiguities of the main character showcase the conflicting forces of tradition and subversion intrinsic to these portrayals. The second text, from the perspective of film

[195] Source: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/09/01/a14n1esp.php>

documentary, follows the iconic figure of the mother as well but significantly expands on the larger issues surrounding the socioeconomic and cultural changes that affect the lives of women when they are touched by migration. *Letters from the Other Side* (2006), directed by Heather Courtney, clearly shows an interest in presenting the circumscribed agency these women attain when they are left as heads of household, while also delving into the specific difficulties that international migration has brought to their communities.

One final point to consider before examining these portrayals of women in Mexico in depth is that this is the depiction that has been represented least frequently amongst all of the cultural texts that have a relation to the U.S.-Mexico border. This situation could initially be interpreted as a testament to the marginality of these women in the imaginaries of both countries. This marginalization therefore follows a pattern where all sorts of cultural products (including those originated in the mass media) methodically overlook less dramatic images related to migration in favor of more sensationalist ones. However, the scarcity of these representations could also be attributable to the discomfort that can potentially come from acknowledging that these supposedly conservative women —"left behind" to uphold conventionally patriarchal and nationalist values— could at the same time work to surreptitiously undermine them. Thus, the unintended consequences of this "abandonment" of women could initially be noted as empowerment through socioeconomic independence as well as gendered defiance to established behavioral expectations of passivity and victimhood.

4.1 The revenge of *la mater dolorosa*: Gendered ambivalence in *Mujer on the Border*.

“Como todas las mujeres de por aquí. Tan solas, sin hombres…” [‘Like all the women from around here. So lonely, without men…’] (Muro and Aura 12).[196]

The image of countless ghost towns in the Mexican countryside emerging as a result of male migration to the United States may bring up attached images of helplessness and loneliness, feelings usually associated with the plight of women in underdeveloped countries.[197] The fact is that in Mexico, regions where male migrants predominantly come from, that is to say, “expelling” entities such as Oaxaca, Michoacán, Puebla, Zacatecas, Guanajuato and Guerrero, do have more women than men living in “hogares unipersonales” [‘one-person households’] (INMUJERES 2). According to official Mexican statistics, 54.1% of these women depend on monetary transfers —mostly from relatives but also from pensions (INMUJERES 6) —while 39% of them work outside their home to support themselves (INMUJERES 5). This data paints a limited picture of a complex situation of marginalization and possible dependency that can be addressed by fictional representations in a much more nuanced manner.

The theatrical monologue *Mujer on the Border* (2005), adapted by María Muro and Marta Aura from the original screenplay *El Llanto del Verdugo* by Antonio and Javier Malpica, strives to tackle the larger issues that may result from the increasing numbers of *mujeres solas* in Mexico’s rural areas due to international migration.[198] Thus, this play explores how the exodus

---

[196] All the translations are my own unless noted.
[197] For a suggestive example of a visual artist’s representation of this pressing phenomenon, see the work « 2501 migrantes » of Alejandro Santiago.
<http://alejandrosantiago.com.mx/proyectos.html>
[198] *Mujer on the Border* was first performed in the Museo del Chopo and in the Foro Shakespeare in Mexico City in 2005. It was later staged in Zacatecas, Chicago and Dallas. Source: http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/09/01/a14n1esp.php. While I believe this play was

of Mexican rural migrants can affect the composition of national, cultural and gendered identities by focusing on the intimate misfortunes of the sole character of this dramatic piece, Aurora Hernández. Furthermore, by concentrating exclusively on a female perspective, *Mujer on the Border* is able to contribute to a discussion of the challenges that the changing situation in Mexico's interior poses to typically conventional expectations of rural women held by a patriarchal Mexican society. That is to say, the figure of Aurora in Muro and Aura's text, by virtue of having been "left behind" in a small Zacatecan town by both her husband and her son, ends up embodying both the defiances *and* the compliances to traditional gendered roles and qualities expected of Mexican women under these circumstances of male migration. Indeed, from a feminist perspective, Aurora can be seen as epitomizing the gendered *ambivalence* present in numerous representations of Mexican women. This character's portrayal hence becomes conflictive as she simultaneously personifies a conservatively long-suffering and devoted mother pining for her migrant son as well as a woman who displays sufficient agency to defy the system that oppresses her loved one and to exact her own revenge on the *gringo* El Rojo, a "representative" of this hegemonic system.

Moreover, the sociodemographic transformations illustrated in the play go beyond questions of gender to bring to light several of the less-than-rosy outcomes that such economic processes of globalization as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have brought on the Mexican countryside (González Montes and Salles 19). While NAFTA's various negative consequences for Mexico's rural areas are certainly a matter that the country's ruling neoliberal elites would rather ignore, these adverse outcomes are addressed in *Mujer on the Border* from a

---

last presented in 2009 (a testament to its success), I was unable to get more information about its box office achievements.

multitude of viewpoints.[199] Thus, Muro and Aura's play examines —from the diverse perspectives of national and cultural identities, international politics and gender analysis— how the socioeconomic conditions in small Mexican towns deserted by international migrants may bring about unintended repercussions that transcend the domestic sphere in increasingly marginalized rural populations.

Even as Mexico's governing class still tends officially to disregard the damaging results of migration to the United States for the general public, it is quite remarkable that this increasingly adverse situation has been passed over as well by the majority of Mexican writers, at least with respect to literary texts dealing with this subject.[200] For, even though the Mexican countryside has long been a favorite topic for Revolución and post-Revolución authors, the interaction (or clash) of Mexico's rurality with the occurrence of international migration has only been explored in very few narrative representations. This small number of literary interpretations of those "left behind" —even smaller if the story in question focuses on a female character— has mostly used the short story format to delve into this topic. A brief outline of three of these short stories should suffice to provide some context within contemporary Mexican literature for the appearance of *Mujer on the Border* in 2005, showing that while being different in genres, these texts share not only a thematic subject but similar imagery in their portrayals of "las que se quedan" [those (women) who stay].

---

[199] To read a defense of NAFTA by current Mexican president Felipe Calderón, see : <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/01/08/index.php?section=politica&article=003n1pol>

[200] In fact, in recent years, Mexican rulers have progressively reversed their outlook on international migrants by praising and recognizing them for their contribution to the Mexican economy in the form of remittances, thereby continuing to overlook the worsening implications of the phenomenon of migration for the Mexican countryside overall (Balslev Clausen 32).

The appropriately named Dolores, the woman who *mournfully* awaits her husband in the banks of the Bravo/Grande river in Eduardo Parra's story "La piedra y el río" ['The Rock and the River'] reaches almost archetypical status as a protective icon for male border crossers, embodying the figures of a legendary oracle, of alternatively a witch and a saint, but maybe most importantly, of a symbolic anchor to the land. An incarnation of marital fidelity, Dolores assumes another paradigmatic role as adoptive *mother* of the narrator of this story, a little boy who is left behind in her care by his migrant father, who, like Dolores' husband, never returns. Dolores, a character that acquires almost mythical proportions in the story, is commonly associated with the sobriquets "la loca de la ribera [y] 'la estatua de sal'" ['the crazy woman of the river bank [and] 'the statue of salt''] (Parra 16). In light of our discussion of the representation of the women who do not leave, these epithets attain further relevance as they can be seen to symbolize allegedly "typical" feminine characteristics of passivity and devotion that borders on madness in its doomed hope for the return of the beloved migrant male. And yet Dolores' portrayal cannot be read as completely disempowered, as Parra constructs a border imaginary surrounded by magical realism where this female protagonist plays the vital role of *madrecita* to those who brave the river, a "protector" who can read and advise on the currents and the storms, a powerful ghostly legend of *la frontera*.

Cristina Pacheco, who has long been a chronicler of the lives of the Mexican working class, puts forward the next representation of women who remain in Mexico while their loved ones migrate to the United States. In Pacheco's collection of short stories *El Oro del Desierto* (2005), "La Última Llamada" ["The Last Call"] is the most salient example of this particular representation of women-in-waiting. In this story, the narrative focus is on the abandonment in which all the women in the unnamed dusty town live. The protagonist of "La Última Llamada,"

ironically named Esperanza [Hope], personifies this desertion as she has inherited the unenviable task of being in charge of the operation of the only phone booth in town, an archaic device used to summon over the women who receive the ever more infrequent international calls from the migrant men. Esperanza's tale is the story of all the women's progressive disenchantment, as their future appears to be measured in terms of the loss of their youth and their faith as they languish while they try to delay the inevitable day when —as was the case with Esperanza herself— their husband or boyfriend will call no more. And while this particular portrayal of women is definitely a submissive one from a feminist perspective, perhaps Pacheco's attention to these women's lives as a paradigm of neglect and broken promises could also be read as a parallel criticism of the Mexican government's inept response to the socioeconomic problems of a countryside increasingly forsaken by international migration, a countryside that is more and more feminized.

Finally, to complete this brief summation of the written textual approaches to the images of *las que se quedan*, the iconoclastic Heriberto Yépez offers the reader a female protagonist that defies preconceptions of the fidelity expected of the women who remain on the Mexican side of the border. In fact, the border-dwelling narrator of the short story "Oiga" ['Listen to me'] —whose association to migration comes from her *coyote* common-law husband— is unique in her open expression of her sexuality and in her role of raconteur of migrants' stories.[201] In fact, this female character —the only one who is not waiting at all— appears to be intent on scaring her migrant-to-be interlocutor into aborting his journey with her tales of the horrors that await him and anyone else who braves the desert, such as the murderous gangs and the ghosts that roam the border. Even as it is unclear whether the woman's motives to keep this migrant man by

---

[201] "Oiga" is included in the collection *Cuentos para Oír y Huir al Otro Lado* (2002).

her side and in her bed are altruistic or self-centered, it is in any case apparent that she can be interpreted as an *agent* (in her self-reliance and her assertiveness) and a *speaker*, two characteristics which are shared by Aurora Hernández, the protagonist of *Mujer on the Border*.

Although the character of Aurora keeps traditional, even patriarchal markers, such as her depiction as a long-suffering mother, she was nevertheless carefully crafted by both Muro and Aura so as not to be perceived as an overdramatic victim, according to interviewer Stephany Slaughter.[202] For, even though the plot of *Mujer on the Border* could be construed as somewhat melodramatic since it obviously appeals to heightened sentiments, in reality the development of the play fits better within the classification of tragedy.[203] That is to say, while the story of Aurora as a suffering mother may fall into the familiar pattern of melodrama, the tragic elements of this play ultimately override this classification. This is because, as all tragedies, *Mujer on the Border* has a true *heroine*, who combats in vain against the seemingly superior forces of the U.S.-American "justice" system that has detained her son, as well as against the greater powers of globalization that she ultimately blames for the Mexican exodus *al Norte*. And yet, one must not forget that even if Aurora is no victim, she is still immersed in a dramatic situation, one where her portrayal as a conventional Mexican mother is paramount. Namely, Aurora's plight, as narrated through her monologue, is intrinsically connected to the complicated circumstances that result in the death sentence of her son Rodrigo in the United States, in addition to the deadly vengeance that Aurora executes on her boss, a U.S.-American man she calls el Rojo o el gringo.

In fact, *Mujer on the Border* begins with Aurora's return home after attending el Rojo's funeral prayers (which tellingly she organized herself). By alternatively noting Aurora's

---

[202] Source: <http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/3.1/eng/en31_pg_slaughter.html>
[203] Source : <http://www.reference.com/browse/tragedy>

reminiscences and her commentary on her present situation, the audience becomes aware of the background and the details of the tragedy that culminated with *two* deaths by execution, one being public and the other one private. Thus, Aurora's monologue very soon turns to the description of her son's shattered dreams of becoming a professional *fútbol* player, crediting his ensuing heartbreak as the reason for his migration north. For the mother left behind, her son's migration is clearly perceived as the ultimate cause for his incarceration in Los Angeles for the murder of a white teenager, a crime —needless to say— that Aurora is positive Rodrigo did not commit. Aurora then recounts her personal calvary as she tries to earn extra money by making *piñatas* by hand in the hope of being able to pay for a defense lawyer that may help free her son. In the end, even as Aurora learns English and desperately studies U.S.-American laws on her own, all her efforts are in vain and Rodrigo receives the lethal injection in San Quentin.[204] Obsessed and enraged with the injustice of a world and without viable options for her son, the grief-stricken Aurora delivers a Pentothal injection to el Rojo, thereby completing what she believes to be a cycle of vengeance.

The unfairness of the transnational circumstances of her son's migration, imprisonment and capital punishment serve, within the structure of the play, to highlight several of the aforementioned ambivalent aspects of Aurora's character as a Mexican woman. To begin with, the protagonist's characterization as a *mother* above all —even a Mater Dolorosa of sorts— could be seemingly interpreted as manifestly *passive* due to the centrality of sorrow to her portrayal. But while the exploration of Aurora's maternal grief is essential to the dramatic development of *Mujer on the Border*, her *actions* throughout the play belie any assumption of

[204] While the unpublished manuscript of the play does not include the audio of Rodrigo's execution, it does mention that this is heard as an off-stage voiceover. Stephany Slaughter's review describes quite effectively other aspects of the play's mise en scène that set the mood for the different thematic issues treated in *Mujer on the Border*.

meekness, in stark contrast with the behaviors that were once expected of Mexican women. These more traditional expectations may be exemplified by the following assertion that: “La actitud de perenne renuncia es en efecto inherente al comportamiento femenino [y] la culminación de este proceso se realiza en la maternidad” [‘The attitude of eternal resignation is in effect inherent to feminine conduct [and] the culmination of this process is achieved in maternity’] (Alegría 280). In the particular case of Aurora, it is apparent that there is no quiet acceptance of the adversity in her life, as she wishes she could have done more: “A lo mejor no hice todo lo que pude…” [‘Maybe I didn’t do all I could…’] (Muro and Aura 25). Moreover, one may argue, it is precisely Aurora’s condition of motherhood that acts as the motor for her actions and, is ultimately, the driving force of the play.

Nevertheless, one would be hard-pressed to state that Aurora’s battles accomplish any tangibly *effective* results in the end. For, despite traditional representations of the Mexican countryside that advance the notion that motherhood per se gives women social value, self-esteem, emotional fulfillment, economic security and relative empowerment, the dramatic “reality” depicted in *Mujer on the Border* shows Aurora with none of those sociocultural advantages (González Montes and Salles 39). It would seem then that one of the unexplored effects of international migration would be the additional marginalization of mothers who are left behind, a dire condition that leaves them with barely any alternatives when faced with injustice, except for acts of reactive retribution such as the very extreme vengeance that Aurora undertakes on el Rojo.

And yet, despite this murderous act, the particular quality of Aurora’s motherhood as examined within Muro and Aura’s play could still be associated with the best known exemplar of tender and devoted Mexican maternity, embodied by “the Virgin of Guadalupe [in which] we

have the model of mother as love-giving and forever nurturing" (Berg, *Cinema* 58). Indeed, the constant in Aurora's characterization lies in her unswerving dedication to her son Rodrigo in mind, body and spirit, as exemplified by the tribulations she goes through in her futile attempts to free him, as well as her relentless endeavors to preserve his memory as "un joven lleno de ilusiones" ['a young man full of dreams'] (Muro and Aura 16). Additionally, there are enough references within *Mujer on the Border* to construe a characterization of Aurora's son as particularly youthful and dependent on her, therefore underscoring the portrayal of Aurora as a caring and protecting mother. For instance, when Aurora has to spend her own money to help Rodrigo get enough cash for his *coyote* and later, to pay for his trial, the audience is likely to notice how Aurora's unconditional motherly love makes up for all of Rodrigo's shortcomings.[205] Nevertheless, within the marginalized context of Muro and Aura's play, one never senses a stereotyped "hipervaloración de la maternidad" ['hyperestimation of motherhood'] in the case of Aurora, mostly since her condition as a mother is neither redeeming nor honored (Melgar 15). This lack of moral or societal recognition can be explained by recalling that the dramatic emphasis of this theatrical production is placed on the protagonist's final, complete solitude, in which there is no one left to value her emulation of *the* "prototypical" (Guadalupana) Mexican mother.

Furthermore, Aurora's gendered characterization is shown to have an added layer of symbolic depth as her condition as a mother becomes associated with *telluric* symbolism

[205] Furthermore, this example also reflects on the actual unpredictability of remittances as a stable source of income for the families left behind in Mexico. In fact, social scientists like Marina Ariza have concluded that remittances must be demystified as an option for feminine empowerment or for local development. In other words, factors such as the added work and responsibility that an absent relative means for many Mexican women or the prevalent conditions of destitution which barely allow subsistence, even with the money sent from the United States, have to be considered as important disadvantages that the women who stay must face (Ariza 474).

prevalent in the play. This earthy imagery within *Mujer on the Border* relies heavily on the continuous references made in the monologue to the fields and to its related catastrophes, such as droughts and torrential rains, like the one significantly positioned at the very beginning of the play. The precise connection of Aurora's character with the land she inhabits may be appreciated most clearly in her impassionate defense of her native soil despite its floods or its droughts: "y su tierra, ¿qué? Donde nacieron, ¿qué? Aunque esté seca, ¿qué?" ['and what of their land? The place where they were born, what of it? Even if it is dry, what of it?'] (Muro and Aura 11). For Aurora, like the migrants' hometowns, is clearly deficient in the resources that might have convinced her son (and others like him) to stay. Thus, the correlation of Aurora as a woman and a mother with this abandoned Mexican homeland is consistent with archetypical *earthly* representations of motherhood, even if in this case, the representation is one of scarcity and not of abundance. In addition, in *Mujer on the Border*, this feminine gendered imagery has a counterpart of sorts in the seemingly inescapable association of men with migration and therefore, with the desertion of their home: "todos los hombres de esta tierra desean: 'Irse al Norte'" ['all the men of this land want: 'To go North''] (Muro and Aura 11). Hence, the play reinforces the prevalent cultural conception that Mexican women are supposed to be static, significantly *rooted*, while Mexican men have the questionable "freedom" to be migratory.

There is one single explicit mention of Aurora's sexuality in *Mujer on the Border* and it is meaningfully linked to the image of woman as the ultimate embodiment of the earth. This reference to Aurora's eroticism is connected as well to the absolute solitude she shares with all the women who, like her, have been left behind in this desolate territory: "sin nadie que se ocupe de sembrar la tierra […] sin nadie que te caliente la cama" ['with no one to sow the fields […] with no one to warm up your bed'] (Muro and Aura 12). Beyond this somewhat generic

statement, the reader or the spectator may suspect —as reviewer Stephany Slaughter does— that el Rojo can be identified as Aurora's lover, which would make her final vengeance on him even more tragic. However, in the screenplay the only definitive marker of their relationship as possibly romantic is Aurora's admission that "Yo lo quería al pinche gringo" ['I was fond of that damn gringo'] (Muro and Aura 29).[206]

In the end, however, Aurora's relationship with el Rojo may have more complex gendered and cultural markers than the plain assumption that they once shared a bed. To begin with, the rather impudent manner in which Aurora treats el Rojo, disregarding the customary deference that females are supposed to show males in Mexico, contributes to Aurora's own characterization as a woman that subverts a number of traditional patriarchal expectations, such as obsequiousness: "Así nos llevábamos, medio cargadito. Cuando no estaba de humor, me hablaba en inglés, yo me hacía la sorda" ['That's how we got along, a bit rudely. When he wasn't in a good mood, he would speak to me in English, I would play deaf'] (Muro and Aura 9). Moreover, being that el Rojo is clearly in a position of power with regards to Aurora —since not only is he Aurora's boss but a white U.S.-American as well— her verbal sassiness only emphasizes how much this protagonist actually digresses from a standard "subordinate" and victimized representation, at least as far as this "gringo" is concerned. Additionally, it is quite noteworthy that it is Aurora who *names* this ex-pat in the play with the moniker "El Rojo" —his actual name is never revealed— consequently granting her an extra level of supremacy over him.

In fact, the most distinctive trait of Aurora's representation in *Mujer on the Border* is that it repeatedly distinguishes itself from the popular gendered imagery of the subservient and passive Mexican woman. Indeed, Aurora's characteristic assertiveness, in conjunction with her

[206] "Yo lo quería" can also be translated as "I loved him," even though the verb "amar" would be more common than "querer" when referring to romantic love.

strong will and her staunch maternal devotion, appear to confirm the illustrious dramatic parentage that María Muro gradually envisioned for her protagonist as she wrote her, namely Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Sophocles' Antigone (Muro interviewed by Slaughter). These imagined theatrical foremothers of Aurora deserve a brief comment because, while they may help the reader/spectator relate to the protagonist of Muro and Aura's play, a direct parallelism cannot be established in either comparison. Thus, on the one hand, while contrasting Mother Courage and Aurora one will readily find that even if both characters may be forceful and tenacious women, the latter is definitively more dramatic, especially since Aurora's motivations are predominantly driven by revenge and not survival (or profit, as can be argued with Brecht's protagonist).[207]

On the other hand, the character of Antigone does seem to be more closely aligned with Aurora, as the impetus to act in defense of one's family supersedes all other considerations in both women, pitting them against an unyielding State and its laws, which are judged to be unfair and cruel. And yet, Aurora's insistence on a proper, ritualized burial for her son can be differentiated from Antigone's plea for her brother's funeral rites in that Aurora's supplementary motives are based primarily on culture, not on religion nor on respect for divine law, as is the case with Sophocles' heroine.[208] As a matter of fact, in her grief Aurora goes as far as to *challenge* God: "y si [Dios] me pregunta, entonces yo también le voy a preguntar qué tenía que hacer mi hijo, un joven lleno de ilusiones, en un pleito callejero" ['and if He asks me, then I will

[207] In Brecht's anti-war play "Mother Courage and her Children," the main character is unable to protect her three children, ultimately losing them to war while vainly trying to make a profit from it.

[208] In Sophocles' play, Antigone defies the ruler Creon who has forbade anyone from burying Polyneices, Antigone's brother. She argues that the laws of duty and respect for one's family (created by the gods) supersede the laws of the state, created by man.

also ask Him what was my son, a young man full of dreams, doing in a street fight'] (Muro and Aura 28). For this bereaved Mexican mother, there is evidently no consolation to be had in a world where the divine has allowed such chain of injustices to take place.

Precisely because *Mujer on the Border* centers on a series of grievances that range from the discrimination Mexican migrants face within the U.S.-American legal system to the socioeconomic conditions that bring about this migration in the first place, *Mujer on the Border* conforms to the idea of theater as a form of social protest —a tradition that has been part of Spanish-speaking literature since the beginning of the 20th century.[209] More specifically, Muro and Aura's adaptation attempts to give a voice to those whose lives have been disregarded as others have left them behind, for "quedarse no es noticia. Sufrir la ausencia no es noticia." ['To stay does not make the news. To suffer the absence does not make the news'] (Mayer and Reyes 22). This endeavor of giving a voice to the forgotten becomes even more urgent when the point of view to be highlighted in this particular theatrical arrangement is that of a woman—historically ignored as a valid perspective. This goal of underscoring the feminine angle is probably what inclined Aura and Muro to choose intentionally the format of a monologue for the adaptation of this play when in the original script by the Malpica brothers there were two characters.[210]

Continuing with the idea of how *Mujer on the Border* functions as dramatic denunciation, it must be noticed that the main indictment made in the play is against migration itself. More specifically, this theatrical production directs its accusation towards those in the "sending"

---

[209] The *teatro de los oprimidos* of Brazilian Augusto Boal, the works of Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda in Mexico and the plays of Argentinian Griselda Gambaro are examples of socially motivated theatre originated in Latin America.

[210] As expressed by Marta Aura when interviewed by Juan José Olivares for *La Jornada* in 2005.Source: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/09/01/a14n1esp.php>

country who have ultimately failed to provide suitable socioeconomic circumstances that could prevent the migration of young men such as Rodrigo. This “abandonment” of the Mexican government towards its people is obviously perceived as having taken place much before Rodrigo’s execution, a tragedy that the Mexican authorities who pay attention to Aurora —although too late— are unable to stop. In fact, Aurora’s insight on the underlying causes of her personal tragedy is considerably more far-reaching than the nearsighted excuses coming from the Mexican government. Therefore, the solution proposed by the protagonist to avert the further loss of Mexican lives could easily have appeared in the editorial page of any conscientious newspaper:

> Que [los políticos] se preocupen por nuestros paisanos […] antes de que se echen al río […] antes de que se les antoje el “*American Dream*” [That [the politicians] care for our compatriots […] before they throw themselves into the river […] before they crave the “American Dream”] (Muro and Aura 27, italics in original).

Regrettably, Aurora’s reasoning is of the type that the Mexican establishment seems bound and determined to ignore, as it could be construed as hindering to the nation’s favored self-representation as a country fully prepared for globalization. Moreover, Aurora’s marginalized position as a speaker —because she is a woman and because of her impoverished, rural background— makes it significantly more difficult for her voice to be heard and for her criticism against Mexico’s imagined prosperity to be taken seriously.

Considering the binational approach of Muro and Aura’s work, it follows that Mexico is not the only country that is criticized by *Mujer on the Border*. The major charge that the play brings against the United States intersects with the political question of human rights with respect to the death penalty that so affects Aurora’s family. For the protagonist, the lack of

justice in Rodrigo's case can be solely blamed on her lack of funds, which in her mind hamper her ability to get a good lawyer who may have obtained a lesser sentence for her son (Muro and Aura 24). Aurora proves this point as she insists on Rodrigo's innocence, all the time providing details of the faulty judicial proceedings he was subjected to. Amongst the most blatant blunders of the court with respect to Rodrigo's situation, Aurora recounts the false accusation that Rodrigo's cellmate makes —in order to have his own sentence reduced— and the last-minute rejection of a witness that may have exculpated Rodrigo, as this witness was present in the street fight where Aurora's son supposedly murdered the white teenager. Adding to the climate of injustice and to the pathos surrounding the outcome of this case, it is significant that Aurora takes on the "language of the enemy," thus learning "el inglés leído" ['written English'] in an attempt to assist in Rodrigo's defense (Muro and Aura 8). It is of further note that Aurora's English lessons come from el Rojo himself, in exchange for the insulin injections he needed and that she would provide. In the end, even though Aurora tries to learn the logic of the State to save her son, ultimately her subaltern position, which stems from nationality, gender and socioeconomic status, does not grant her any access to a proper defense for her son.[211]

Mujer on the border as a document insists on the meaninglessness of capital punishment that has sent thousands of people to their deaths, some, like Rodrigo, innocent. Therefore, even as the protagonist sorrowfully imagines what her son´s last words were, she also speaks for others: detailing how the men in death row either asked for forgiveness or were spiteful in their

[211] Since 1988, 25 foreign nationals have been executed in the United States. Currently around 60 Mexican nationals are currently on death row. Source: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/abolish/factsheets/DeathPenaltyFacts.pdf>

final hours or maintained their innocence...[212] With regard to the actual execution of Rodrigo, Aurora's narrative attains a quality almost reminiscent of magical realism, as she in fact appears to be witnessing the action in the prison as it takes place. In the screenplay, then, Aurora painstakingly describes the events leading up to her son´s death: the absurd vigilance of the prison guards, Rodrigo's imagined very "Mexican" last meal, the incongruence of asking for his confession, the precise time (forty seconds) that it took for the sentence to be carried out (Muro and Aura 19). Ostensibly, the staging of *Mujer on the Border* —as portrayed and commented by critics such as Stephany Slaughter and Mariana Norandi— adds an even more eerie attribute to Aurora's recreation of her son's death. This is so because, while Aurora wretchedly visualizes Rodrigo's final moments, three voices in off —supposedly the two guards and Rodrigo— reconstruct his execution step by step. Thus, the complexity of the play itself is considerably increased, as the written text becomes more akin to a visual representation. Other elements of the theatrical production, such as the video of Aurora walking the streets of a deserted Zacatecan town, or the minimalist stage set or the recurrence of the tambora music, all contribute to enhance the message of desolation caused by the injustice of Rodrigo's death.

Consequently, it is not surprising, given the pathos expressed in Aurora's monologue with respect to her son's execution, that the theme of revenge is central to *Mujer on the Border*. This revenge, as it cannot be taken on Rodrigo's executioners, must then be displaced "forward" onto someone else; an act that is, ultimately, pointless and absurd, as Aurora´s settling of scores in the person of el Rojo leaves her ever lonelier and still spiteful. This retribution exacted on el Rojo's hegemonic body —simply because she has no other outlet close at hand — is, in Aurora's

[212] Aurora is able to retell the stories of the executed because, somewhat morbidly, she has kept clippings of their last words as part of her frantic research into the U.S.-American legal system in her attempt to save Rodrigo.

eyes, akin to the death sentence carried out on her son, which she believes to be a vengeful act as well. Furthermore, this revenge is represented as uncanny from the beginning, starting with the bizarre series of circumstances that ultimately lead to Rodrigo's execution. To begin with, we must note the *fortuitousness* of the accident that motivates Rodrigo's migration: breaking his leg while playing fútbol costs him a career in professional sports. The apparent determination of Rodrigo's destiny by fate continues with the *coincidence* of his being in Los Angeles en route to Chicago when he got involved in the ill-fated street fight that ultimately caused his imprisonment. It appears that Rodrigo (and thus, Aurora) cannot escape a course of events set by providence.

The idea of predestination will be seen to extend to the families of the young men who tragically die: Rodrigo by the capital punishment and his alleged victim, Henry Spencer, murdered in an unspecified way. As Aurora astutely observes, the added irony of this drama of two families is that, although "los Hernández y los Spencer nos quedamos aquí en la tierra odiándonos" ['the Hernández and the Spencers remain here on earth hating each other'] (Muro and Aura 20) the fact is that they did not even know each other, that their paths should have never crossed and that the vindictiveness displayed serves no purpose to either group. Finally, it must be noted that the "juego de las venganzas" ['game of revenge'] (Muro and Aura 30) pits opposing paradigms against each other. Therefore, we have Aurora's own personal and private sense of justice —removed from national or cultural mores— set against the *gringo* justice, repeatedly characterized by being unmovable, cruel and "spectacular" in that executions are meant to be, to an extent, public events. Contrasting the explicit mechanisms of punishment that the U.S.-American system applies to Rodrigo's sentence in the form of the meticulous preparations for his execution, the fact that Aurora does not announce the implementation of her

own “justice” can be perceived as making her redress more dignified and thus possibly more humane, since she doesn’t revel on announcing el Rojo’s final moments to him.

And while Aurora´s “one-woman” justice system does not appear to be derived from her Mexican identity, there are significant spaces within Muro and Aura’s play where the national character intersects with specific gendered markers. Thus, an important part of Mexican identity is symbolized in the play by the activities that characterize both mother and son: he is linked to *fútbol* —in Mexico, a mostly masculine endeavor and pipe dream— while she is repeatedly associated with her handcraft of piñata-making. This antique demonstration of artisanship also functions as a distinctive element of traditional cultural identity. Moreover, in the case of *Mujer on the Border*, the manufacture of piñatas is denoted as a feminine pursuit, one that has been honored by women in Aurora’s family since her great-grandmother, but that her son refused to learn. An additional noteworthy aspect of both of these symbolic activities is that they move the play’s plot forward; as it is Rodrigo’s injury while playing *fútbol* that dashes his hopes of playing professionally and provides the “motivation” to try his luck *del otro lado* (combined with his rejection of the family trade). As for Aurora, her return to the piñatas is forced by her son’s imprisonment as an improbable —and therefore additionally symbolic— means to secure the extra money she needs in order to visit him and pay for his defense. In the end Aurora’s revisiting of the tradition of handcrafts is shown to be a futile effort to save Rodrigo. This outcome parallels what appears to be the fate of the Mexican countryside if they continue reverting to “conventional” solutions, such as agricultural subsidizing, in an attempt to face up to the dramatic changes brought forth by migration. And yet, the theatrical use of the piñata leitmotif is quite complex and cannot be readily pegged as negative, as this occupation indeed brings some solace and comfort to the grieving mother.

Moreover, the piñata appears to have its own philosophy and symbology: for Aurora, it represents the *blind*(folded) struggle of mankind against fate, expecting a prize to fall out from the sky, but in all its futility because in the end "una vez que [la piñata] está rota y vacía... entonces ya no hay nada que hacer" ['once [the piñata] is broken and empty, then there is nothing to be done" (Muro and Aura 27). The evident parallel with Rodrigo and Aurora's lives replicates their subaltern condition and the lack of agency and control over their own existence. Furthermore, the piñata is strongly associated with Aurora's notions of honor and cultural identity, as it represents the last resort of the poor to have a "properly" Mexican celebration: "podía no haber regalos o pastel, pero **una piñata colorida, siempre**" ['there could be no presents or cake, but a colorful piñata, always'] (Muro and Aura 5, emphasis in original). Linking "appropriate" *mexicanidad* with a specific socioeconomic level may be, to some extent, a double-edged sword, for even as it provides a cultural sense of self-respect to the marginalized; it may also strangely compensate for their inferior position and hence justify, or at least excuse, the status quo.

Undoubtedly, piñatas are charged with meaning in *Mujer on the Border*. Thus, it is no accident that Aurora's favorites are those made of *barro*, with their immediate earthy smell, as they connect more closely with the images of the feminine and of motherhood represented in the play (Muro and Aura 7). Within the play's structural composition, it must be noted that Aurora returns to her retelling of the history of piñatas whenever she despairs over her son's execution. This dramatic connection further advances the piñata symbology and provides some consolation for the bereaved mother because, amidst her mourning, she may at least turn to her one source of

pride: the connection of her craft with a traditional conception of a humble, but dignified *mexicanidad*.[213]

The protagonist's particular brand of Mexicanness extends quite naturally to a cultural conception of death which becomes interconnected to her piñata-making as Aurora appears to be gluing newspaper cut-outs that contain the last words of death row inmates onto her piñatas. This is one of the illustrations of the diametrically different approaches to death from the Mexican and the U.S.-American perspectives that are showcased in *Mujer on the Border*. In fact, death acts a signifier and a means of distinguishing between cultural identities: "**Estos gringos no saben de ceremonias ni de lutos**" ['These gringos know nothing of ceremonies nor of mourning" (Muro and Aura 18, bold in original). This differentiation continues to be contrasted throughout the play through examples such as Aurora's hopes to be able to honor her son with a great funeral, like the one she threw for El Rojo, in comparison with the formulaic and aseptic execution procedures that Rodrigo had to face. Furthermore, the antagonism between these two identities is demonstrated with the town's rejection of El Rojo even in death, in particular when most people leave the funeral prayers that Aurora organized for him "que porque era gringo" ['because he was a gringo'] (Muro and Aura 2). With instances such as these, the two national identities are construed in opposition: the Mexican one as intrinsically ritualistic while the U.S.-American one is perceived as overtly legalistic. And yet, this inordinate adherence to the letter of law is proven to be fallible, insincere and heartless by Aurora as she insists on her son's innocence until the end, while noticing the contradictions in a judicial process that should have guaranteed a fair treatment to Rodrigo but instead "sin misericordia te condenaron a la pena capital [...] te

[213] Again, one must notice the ambivalence —as well as the prevalence— of this *pobre pero honrado* manner of representation of marginalized Mexicans in a variety of cultural texts, a portrayal that probably had its heyday during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema in the 40s but can still be observed, for instance, in a multitude of *telenovelas* nowadays.

encerraron en una celda oscura, inhóspita" ['with no mercy they sentenced you to the capital punishment [...] they locked you up in a dark, bleak cell'] (Muro and Aura 18). By highlighting the cruelty of her son's plight, Aurora is ultimately addressing the larger injustices surrounding undocumented Mexican migration to the United States, including the references to a vastly unequal balance of power between nations and individuals.

Nevertheless, the relevance of *Mujer on the Border* to the discussion of general migratory issues goes beyond simply underscoring the multiple disparities between the two countries involved. Muro and Aura's play transcends mere denunciation as it calls its audience's attention to those most overlooked by analysts and politicians: the women who are left behind. In creating a character that symbolizes as many ambivalent positions as Aurora, this text is able to stress the various ambiguities inherent to this aspect of Mexican migration. Thus, even if Aurora is primarily portrayed as a mother, a role that in rural communities supposedly "comprende la reproducción social y cultural de los individuos" ['comprises the social and cultural reproduction of individuals'], the outcome of this dramatic piece would apparently leave her motherhood barren and deserted (Fagetti 304). And yet, considering solely the ending of this play would fail to notice that the richness of Aurora's portrayal can be found in her many contradictions: as an abnegated, traditional, telluric mother as well as a woman who has claimed her own voice and her own revenge, therefore daring to subvert established assumptions and positions of power.

4.2 *Letters from the Other Side* or Penélope a la mexicana.

"Que nos duele mucho su ausencia." ['We really feel your absence.'] Eugenia González, *Letters from the Other Side*.[214]

The symbolism associated with Aurora´s representation as a woman enduring the effects of migration in *Mujer on the Border* gives way to the next depiction that will be discussed here, one that strives to break away from fiction, while nonetheless bearing the imprint of a mediated vision. In the documentary *Letters from the Other Side* (2006), director Heather Courtney presents the stories of three different groups of rural Mexican women whose lives have been irrevocably altered by the migration of their male relatives to the United States.[215] These visual narratives necessarily interact with the socioeconomic context of globalized migration and its effects on rural households, where the percentage of Mexican women acting as heads of their family unit has seen a small but wide-ranging increment of three percentage points from 2000 to 2005 (from 20% to 23%).[216] Moreover, in some "sending" localities —such as the Guanajuato countryside featured in the documentary— it is mostly women who are around 40 years old who become completely responsible for the agricultural production, as their migrant sons and daughters-in-law "turn away" from *la tierra* (D'Aubeterre Buznego 52).

Nonetheless, not all recent research points towards an enhanced economic engagement for women in Mexico's agrarian areas, with all the cultural implications this phenomenon may have. For instance, the work of María Luisa Tarrés maintains that in this 21st century, Mexican

---

[214] All the translations in this section will follow the film's subtitles into English, unless otherwise noted.

[215] I will usually refer to the film by the shortened *Letters*.

[216] Source: <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/soc/sis/sisept/default.aspx?t=mhog05&c=9495&e=>

women in rural communities can barely make ends meet because of the migration of their male relatives, a phenomenon which cancels any possibility of change with regards to the responsibilities traditionally expected of them, such as their reproductive role (138). And yet, it appears that with the latest dramatic fall in remittances incoming from the United States —a 16% drop between January and November 2009 in comparison with the same period in 2008— there may be no choice for peasant families but to depend increasingly on women's remunerated labor in order to make ends meet.[217]

Whether the greater involvement of women in external employment vis-à-vis the migratory exodus that has taken place in Mexico's rural communities means that they are actually breaking away from traditional, patriarchal gender roles or not, the most widespread cultural representations tend to focus on the stigma of abandonment. Therefore, the significance of Courtney's film is that it goes beyond painting what could feasibly be a common picture of "forsaken" Mexican women: either as helpless, victimized ingénues or as melodramatically selfless, dependent mothers. In fact, *Letters* endeavors —from a noticeably feminist perspective— to present what I will call a "realistic agency" that the featured women progressively attain. I am using this term to emphasize that the representation of the women in this film, while sympathetic, does not hide or disguise the limitations to their empowerment in favor of presenting them as heroic but unreal "agents." Thus, the transformation of these women, as is displayed in the documentary, transcends the thematic and may be also detected in the composition of the film because of the order of the sequences chosen by the filmmaker. That is to say, the documentary purposefully follows a dramatic structure to emphasize the women's

[217] This figure corresponds to 3,740 million dollars less than what was sent in the previous year. Source:
<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/01/05/index.php?section=economia&article=014n1eco>

agency: from an introduction to the characters to a moment of disappointment to the strategies they employ —with varying degrees of effectiveness— to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Thus, the three sets of women go from a patriarchal motherly/spousal stereotype to a relative empowerment on the economic front that mostly serves the additional purpose of releasing them from their portrayal as subordinate "women-awaiting" or Mexican Penelopes. Nevertheless, the conclusion of Courtney's documentary is bittersweet in that some of the female protagonists' aspirations come to fruition and others do not—an ending that hence may contribute to the audience's perception of some realism in the film. This "appearance of reality" is essential in the legitimization of non-fictional visual media, as it adds to its objectivity; even though *Letters* patently shows its ideological commitment and partiality to its subjects' troubles, thus being easily classified as a rhetorical film.[218]

In order to contextualize Courtney's documentary amongst other rhetorical visual works of non-fiction pertaining to the issue of Mexican migration to the United States, it should be noted that, while there are numerous movies and documentaries from both sides of the border that center on the plight of migrants, there are rather few visual representations which focus on the effects of the migrants' absence in Mexico. From the U.S.-American side, only Martina Guzmán's documentary *Milagros: Made in Mexico* (2006) focuses on this idea of villages deeply affected by male migration to *el Norte*. This film attempts to spotlight an increasingly relevant crisis for both countries: the dwindling population of rural Mexico and the consequent

[218] "The goal in such a [rhetorical] film is to make the audience believe or feel something about the subject matter, and perhaps to act upon that belief or feeling" (Bordwell 55). While the expected action may not be completely evident in Courtney's film, one could argue that mere awareness of the women's situation is the anticipated outcome that the film intends to achieve.

"feminization" of its *pueblos*.[219] However, while Guzmán's film can definitively be seen as a call for attention to this subject, it is somewhat problematic in some of the discourses it reproduces without proper questioning, consequently perpetuating a victimized portrayal of those left behind. For example, the interviewees' insistence on their love of homeland and country has a ring of nationalist propaganda attached to it, which furthers a purely melodramatic representation of migration. And even though in *Milagros: Made in Mexico* there are abundant instances of women becoming economically self-reliant, their depictions nonetheless consistently revolve around the categorically abnegated and submissive image of *la madre mexicana*.[220]

As for the Mexican side of these representations, the government-subsidized Canal Once is arguably both the most accessible and the better-researched forum where a regular TV audience can peer into what is still construed as the tragedy of migration, but without significantly recurring to the self-sacrificed maternity seen above. More specifically, their documentary series *México: Tierra de Migrantes* (2007) attempts to put a "human" face to this transnational phenomenon and one of its foci is the impact of migration to the United States on Mexican families in rural areas.[221] In six one hour-long chapters, the series goes back and forth between sending and receiving states in both countries, in depictions mostly removed from the more fictional, melodramatic or clichéd ones that other visual media —such as commercial

---

[219] At the national level, the population in rural areas (towns with less than 2,500 inhabitants) has dropped from 25.4% in 2000 to 23.5% in 2005. The aforementioned "sending" states present an even more marked decrease in residents. Source: <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/rutinas/ept.asp?t=mpob13&s=est&c=3190>

[220] Despite going as far as directly contacting the director, I was unable to obtain a copy of this documentary and since I only viewed this movie once in February 2007, I could not possibly use it extensively here.

[221] Source: <http://oncetv-ipn.net/migrantes/presentacion/>

movies, *telenovelas* or other dramatic TV series— routinely offer on this topic.[222] However, it is also fair to say that TV documentary series such as this one have a limited viewership, which may explain why they can "afford" to present less popular formats for their portrayals.[223]

Traditionally, one would expect that the representations surrounding the issues of migration put forth by full-length documentary films are possibly the closest ones to those in Canal Once's *México: Tierra de Migrantes*, in terms of the in-depth approach to the subject matter. An additional similarity of this Mexican series with *Letters* in particular is that while they both show a marked predisposition to follow personal stories with the possible intent of inspiring feelings of sympathy in their audiences, they attempt to do so without turning to ubiquitous melodrama. The main difference between them lies in the preferred point of view, which is clearly demonstrated in Courtney's film as exclusively feminine, while *México: Tierra de Migrantes* shows no particular gender slant in its perspective, that is, the people whose difficulties are highlighted are both men and women.

Considering the generalized indifference for Mexican women as protagonists of migration-related stories, *Letters from the Other Side* increasingly comes forth as a relevant

---

[222] For instance, *Cuando Llegan los Mojados* (2003) provides a stereotypically *machista* portrait of young girls playing their sexual cards in order to attain the coveted prize of the wealthy returning migrants as husbands. With the help of the boys' older and well-respected uncle, these women reach their goal in the end although, ironically, the young men have squandered all their hard-earned money and end up being employed by their rich uncle in Mexico. B-movies such as this convey a prevalent—if objectionable to some— view of the gendered representations made by Mexican popular culture around the topic of migration. In contrast, the independent production *La Tragedia de Macario* (2005), even as it also offers an extremely conventional depiction of women, it does so by resorting to the melodramatic and presenting the real-life tragedy of death by asphyxiation while trying to cross the border without documents. A somewhat interesting additional detail is that this case is the fictionalized version of one of the three situations featured in *Letters from the Other Side*.

[223] Canal Once appeals to approximately the same kind of viewers as public service TV stations in the United States.

representation, especially as it provides an alternative to habitually melodramatic depictions of these women as abandoned, dependent victims. And yet, the film insists on highlighting the extreme adversity of their present situation. Indeed, the condition of the women featured in Courtney's documentary always refers to the hardships caused by the migration of their loved ones. The first woman we see on screen, Eugenia, comments on the sorrow she feels for the absence of her sons, while the second one, the subsistence farmer Maria, talks about the destitution prevalent in her land, which triggers the migration to the United States. Carmela, the third woman featured here, talks about the day she saw her husband for the last time as he said good bye to her and their children to go work in the United States for one year. Instead, he —along with seventeen others— died asphyxiated in a trailer that was smuggling undocumented immigrants across the border.[224]

The documentary uses a specific technique to present these accounts visually: the action shots of the women either talking to the camera or doing their daily chores are alternated with shots of them on a TV screen addressing a specific viewer. This combination of "live" and recorded sequences constitutes the narrative method employed throughout the documentary, even though only in one of the three stories (Eugenia's) do we actually observe an authentic reciprocity in the communication via video letters. Therefore, the main focus of the film ultimately does lie on Eugenia. Hereafter, I will briefly comment on each of the accounts that make up the story line of *Letters from the Other Side.*

---

[224] There may be another mention of this horrific incident in the popular song "Mojado," by Maldita Vecindad, a rock band that began playing in Mexico City in the heyday of *Rock en Español*. Written from the perspective of a woman, the lyrics of this song focus on the tragedy of losing a loved one to migration, as this man was only "un cerdo oculto en un camión." ["a pig hiding in a truck."] The disparagement reflected in this reference reproduces the conditions of prejudice and disregard for the life of undocumented migrants

The case of Eugenia, as aforementioned, is unique in that she knows the recipients of her video letter well, as she sends her video correspondence to her son and in turn receives a recorded message from him and her estranged husband. In this exchange, the viewer learns that since her husband and her two older sons left to *el Norte*, Eugenia has basically had to fend for her family alone, as she must support her two daughters and the son who remain in Mexico by herself. She has tried to make a living with the small scale cultivation of *nopal* —paddle cactus— and the manufacturing and selling of derived products such as shampoo, soap, creams, etc. For their part, Eugenia's son Enrique and her absent husband Héctor try to explain themselves to the camera —and therefore, to Eugenia— as to why they have been so negligent in sending remittances back home by adducing that life in the United States is much harder than they thought.

The other two narratives pertain to two distinct groups of women to which Maria and Carmela belong: Maria is part of a cooperative that sells textile handcrafts in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, and Carmela is a member of a microenterprise that intends to open a bakery, initially with government aid. Both Maria and Carmen —in contrast to Eugenia— do not know the people they are sending their video messages to before they send them, and this makes for a more disjointed filmic narrative, in the sense that the viewer does not see a delayed conversation as much as interconnected monologues. In the case of Maria, the video message of her fellow artisans and herself is delivered to a U.S.-American woman who purchased their hand-embroidered cushions and who praises their work in her response. As for Carmela, she shares the screen with Laura, whose husband also died asphyxiated in the trailer and who works together with Carmen and other women to start up the bakery. The director of the documentary delivers their video letter to Russell Knocke, a Homeland Security spokesperson, who listens to

their grievances with regards to the deaths of undocumented migrants in the border. His video reply, in a most official tone, intends to offer them justice by stating that the *coyote* who smuggled their husbands is in prison but the women quickly see past his well-wishing. Precisely because the recipients of Maria's, Carmen's and Laura's communications are unfamiliar to them, the delayed interaction witnessed in Eugenia's example is nonexistent. Therefore, the narrative naturally concentrates more on the women themselves and in the development of their respective situations in Mexico.

At this point, one must seriously consider the crucial involvement that Heather Courtney, as director and creator of *Letters from the Other Side*, has not only with her film but also with its subjects. Courtney claims that at least in Eugenia's case, it was the woman's initiative that instigated the video correspondence.[225] Even though the director is not explicit about the origin of the other two sets of communications, it appears quite clear that the responsibility for organizing these exchanges lay solely within the film's creator. Whether this involvement mostly helps or hinders the documentary's assumed intent of displaying the women's agency is debatable. On the one hand, the women featured in *Letters* do have a voice and thus may be considered as speaking subjects who provide a valuable *testimonial* of their situation —despite the mediation of the filmmaker. Furthermore, it must be noted that the women underscored in the film do become communicators of their own message, their grievances and their frustrations: an unusual condition given their marginality in other spheres and one that could be constructed as an intrinsic part of agency.

[225] Source: <http://www.sidestreetfilms.com/download/lftos_directorsStatement.pdf>

On the other hand, the fact that these specific women do not *actively* collaborate in their own self-representation undermines to an extent Courtney's efforts to empower them.[226] This problematic factor is compounded by the figure of the director herself, an educated U.S.-American woman who, in her own words, has the capability of crossing the border freely —a condition that "those without resources or power," such as her own cinematic subjects, find it ironically impossible to attain.[227] The previous argument is not meant in any way to demean Courtney's commitment to the women she is trying to draw attention to in *Letters*.[228] On the contrary, it is quite obvious that this documentary closely follows an expected persuasive principle that films such as these should have, namely, "to further and advance individual and social causes, values, attitudes and conditions" (Foss 1). I am convinced that *Letters* succeeds in portraying a mostly overlooked aspect of Mexican migration by prominently featuring the social, economic and cultural circumstances these "forgotten" women face without being "blatantly manipulative or preachy" (Kernion).[229] Indeed, the matter-of-fact style displayed in Courtney's film deliberately avoids a concentration on the tragic by creating a realistic yet intimate and in-depth view of the individual women and their families, as well as of the many challenges they must tackle on account of migration.

It could be argued that while the most urgent hardship the women in *Letters* deal with is their economic situation, the most significant one actually relates to the cultural shift that these

[226] We should recall how *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (discussed in chapter 2) did attempt to bridge the gap between subject and film director through the use of footage recorded by the women featured in the film.

[227] Source: <http://www.sidestreetfilms.com/download/lftos_directorsStatement.pdf>

[228] Furthermore, Courtney's privileged status is shared by most academics and other elites from both sides of the border. The work of the director is commendable in its potential to make a difference by raising awareness of a commonly disregarded problem.

[229] Source: <http://www.cinematical.com/2006/03/12/sxsw-review-letters-from-the-other-side/>

rural women must take on as their gender roles are transformed by the absence of the expected male providers. This cultural conversion is represented most notably in the cases of Eugenia and Carmela, since neither of them was initially comfortable or in any way prepared to unexpectedly become the main wage earner.[230] In fact, both women express in the film that at first they felt truly helpless. Eugenia poignantly remembers, "se me había cerrado el mundo; yo era muy, muy tímida" ['my world had ended; I was really, really shy,"] thus revealing the despair she felt when she realized that she could not count on the remittances from her estranged husband anymore. This early reaction of vulnerability is immediately contrasted in the documentary with her present, more empowered situation where she is able to support her family with her small *nopal* business, mirroring Carmela's modest success as a baker. The shot of Eugenia in the cover page of a government brochure —"Manual del Nopal" ['Manual of cactus products'] — is therefore quite symbolic of her newfound pride in her self-sufficiency, particularly since she asserts that she did it with no help from her husband Héctor. At this point, the camera switches to show his reaction, and his face clearly displays a great deal of shame. He can clearly see that he has failed in his "manly" obligations as a breadwinner, while his wife seems to have succeeded at providing for their family in his absence.

Despite their appropriation of this traditionally masculine role in Mexican society, the women of *Letters* still adhere to other patriarchal values, namely, those that defend a conventional image of family unity. Eugenia and Carmela again express this ideal most vehemently throughout the film, although it is also a worry for Maria, mainly as she realizes that without any children to work in the fields, the family plot will certainly disappear. For Carmela,

---

[230] Maria does not express these concerns in the film as her primary source of income has always come from working in the fields with her husband. Yet, the effect of migration looms heavily on her as their only son who has not left to *el Norte* does not appear to want to work the land when his parents are no longer able to do so.

her husband's tragic death in the United States is a paradoxical turning point, for on the one hand it signifies the sorrowful end of a perceived happy family life, but on the other hand, it understandably impels her to find emotional strength for her children as well as the economic means to survive. Eugenia's situation is also fraught with irony, for she pines for her lost family unit even when she does not expect or yearn for her husband's return. Hence, her assertion that "cuando una familia está bien integrada, creo que se vive mejor" ['when a family lives together, I think they live better'] opens the door for an interpretation that, while following a conventional cultural tenet regarding the revered bonds of family, redefines it with a woman as its *economic* and emotional anchor. As the documentary goes on, Eugenia will have to face the loss of more family members, either directly or indirectly, to the pull of *el Norte*, thereby reinforcing her adverse position towards migration, a position that is shared in one way or another by all the women featured in Courtney's film.

And yet, Eugenia is quite different from the other women in *Letters* in that she is the only one that has a critical stance against the most salient aspect of patriarchy, that is to say, the expectation that a man has the "right" to rule the house. Thus, when she and her daughter Maricruz watch the video where Héctor embarrassedly admits that he has been unsuccessful as a migrant and plans to return, it is understandable that they appear anything but pleased. At the same time, they are also quite skeptical about his promise to return. For Eugenia, the thought that the husband that virtually abandoned her, and according to one of their sons, was living with another woman, could come back, is perceived as a threat. She believes that Héctor "va a sentirse con como [sic] los mismos pantalones" ['he is going to think he wears the pants again'] and she is quite clear that she has no intention of allowing him any power over her.

Eugenia's feminist ideas seem to derive solely from her life experiences and her reflections on the path she has taken since her husband left. These ideas extend to include her hopes for her daughters, particularly 14-year old Maricruz. Eugenia, reflecting a possible —and momentous— change of attitudes in rural Mexico, wants her daughters to have jobs that will guarantee them some independence. Therefore, even if they marry, Eugenia wishes "que ellas sepan valerse por sí solas" ['that they know how to support themselves'], a clear indicator of a well-developed feminist stance.[231] Regrettably, towards the end of the film we learn of Eugenia's grave disappointment when Maricruz decides to elope with her boyfriend Víctor, an 18-year old who is set on migrating to the United States very shortly. Maricruz is not sure whether she will follow him or not but she admits that she has long dreamed of going there. For Eugenia, the disillusionment appears to be manifold: firstly because her fervent longing for her children to be close to her is now practically lost as her youngest son, Ernesto, has also been unable to resist the draw of *el Norte.* Moreover, the viewer senses that Maricruz's desertion goes decidedly against her mother's feminist beliefs and expectations for her, particularly as Maricruz's prospects of studying high school now seem quite dim. Eugenia sadly feels that "todos mis esfuerzos, todos mis sacrificios se fueron a la basura." ['all my efforts and sacrifices were a waste.'] Nevertheless, one could think that there is still hope for a feminist consciousness of sorts to arise in Eugenia's youngest daughter Jessica, who accompanies her mother everywhere she goes. Unfortunately, young people in Mexico, especially those who live in "sending" states such as Guanajuato, have increasingly reduced possibilities of continuing their education and thus —more so in the case of women— even less chances of achieving self-sufficiency.

---

[231] The use of the term "feminist" to refer to Eugenia is derived more from her actions and beliefs against patriarchal mores than from her self-identification as a feminist.

The impact of several external and institutional factors on the well-being of the families featured in *Letters* is examined throughout the film, both through the commentary of the women and by means of the different statistics displayed on the screen. In all three stories, the role that the Mexican government has played in all matters related to migration appears as an important feature that has affected these women's lives. For Maria, as well as for Laura and Carmela, the government's actions —or inactions— have brought mostly negative effects.[232] Maria's family realizes that the government's pledges of support for the Mexican countryside are mainly a sham, consequently increasing her apprehension over what will happen to their land when there is no family member left to care for it. Moreover, Maria and the women of her sewing cooperative must deal with government bureaucracy in order to receive additional funding, having to fill out extremely complicated forms to attain it, a task that significantly delays the realization of their dreams. The dealings of Laura and Carmela with the representatives of the Mexican government border on the tragicomic, because the aid they provide to the cooperative of women who plan to open a bakery comes in the form of a display tray and of an unwieldy oven that is so large that a wall must be torn down for it to fit inside Laura's house. One month after the delivery of the equipment, the women had been unable to open the bakery because they had no money (and no government support) to set up the gas installation that was needed to make the oven work. Four months after the equipment was delivered, Carmela was finally baking cakes from her own oven. All the equipment for the collective bakery had been abandoned and the government officials had not returned. The various shortcomings of the Mexican government in its management of assistance to the population who has been most

[232] The only case that could be seen as presenting a positive influence is Eugenia's, as it was government officials who introduced her to the *nopal* business. And yet, after the initial donation of *nopal* plants, she receives no more government help to sustain her small enterprise.

affected by migration to the United States are sorely exemplified in the situation lived by the women featured in Courtney's documentary. Furthermore, the women in this film are perfectly capable of critically commenting on this state of affairs, where their best option for growth is the association with each other —quite independently from the government who *should* be supporting them.

As for Mexico's counterpart in the migration issue, the United States, it is portrayed in *Letters* in at least three distinct facets: through its government and its laws concerning undocumented migrants, as the source of NAFTA and its detrimental consequences for Mexican agriculture and small businesses and as an idealized space that exerts an inordinate pull over the Mexican poor and unemployed. The first aspect, the government itself, is treated more directly by the sections devoted to Carmela and Laura, since they are the only ones who receive an opportunity to communicate with U.S.-American government officials through their video letter. In this exchange, the two women hold the government of the United States directly responsible for the numerous deaths that have occurred while Mexicans cross the border without documents. Laura in particular objects to their slowness in providing employment papers to those who risk their lives in the crossing and are anyways needed to work *del otro lado*. The response from the Homeland Security spokesman in Houston, while intending to be sympathetic, makes his stance with regards to undocumented migrants very clear, as he states that the Department's duty is to enforce immigration laws. It is precisely because of these laws that, according to Laura, "hay muchos muertos, muchas familias que se quedan solas, como nosotros" ['people are dying and families left alone, like us.'] The following shots of the border wall and of a big city in the United States are complemented by screen titles that show the statistics on the increase in Border Patrol agents, in smuggler's fees and in deaths while crossing. By means of presenting both the

women's words and these transitional shots, *Letters* attempts an emotional as well as a more "objective" criticism of the government of the United States vis-à-vis its treatment of Mexican migrants.[233] Even when Carmela and Laura are flown into Houston possibly to testify against the *coyote* responsible for their husbands' deaths, the film —following the women's cue— does not change its disapproving attitude towards this government that remains, in their eyes, insensitive to their plight.

The second part of the position of Courtney's film with regards to the United States is related to NAFTA and it is best discussed through the examples of Maria and Eugenia. In Maria's case, her commitment to her land is put to the test through hardship. She comments that she and her husband can only be subsistence farmers, since the prices for corn are very low and they cannot afford to irrigate their crops. Another transition shot of the fields then serves as the background for more on-screen statistics that claim that, after the 1994 implementation of NAFTA, "by 2002, the number of farming jobs in Mexico had fallen by 1.3 million." Clearly, Mexican farmers such as Maria cannot compete with the heavily subsidized agribusinesses of the United States, which have flooded the Mexican market with cheap corn. The position that *Letters* evidently supports is that NAFTA is a primary cause for the massive migration from Mexico's rural communities to the United States. However, migration is not the only effect of NAFTA that is highlighted in Courtney's documentary. Eugenia, for instance, observes that the availability of cheaper products —a direct result of free trade— often means that her artisanal, *nopal*-based merchandise does not sell. Considering the recurring portrayal of Eugenia as a woman who has been able to survive economically despite the migration of most of her family members, this

[233] It is worthwhile to note the presence of on-screen statistics at key parts of the film as rhetorical devices used to strengthen a particular argument as well as to underscore the supposed impartiality of the documentary.

disappointment is not to be taken lightly within the context of the film's narrative. On the one hand, the disheartening circumstance of Eugenia's problems with inexpensive competition serves to remind the viewer of the non-fictional nature of her story, in which a "happy ending" is not guaranteed. On the other hand, this reality-check makes the representation of Eugenia's agency definitively more nuanced.[234]

The final aspect of the depiction of the United States in Courtney's documentary is related to the seemingly excessive appeal of this country in the imaginary of would-be Mexican migrants, as seen from the perspective of those affected by the migration. Eugenia probably expresses this sentiment more poignantly than the other women of *Letters* when she exclaims "¿qué tiene Estados Unidos que se olvidan de acá de México?" ['what does the United States have that they forget about Mexico?'] The answer to this question is quite complicated, as it involves both push and pull factors. The latter aspects go from simple curiosity about life in the mythic *Norte* to the prospect of available low skilled employment (regardless of whether these jobs actually offset the material and psychological "cost" of migration) to possibly an easier path to infidelity, as was the case with Eugenia's husband.[235] In contrast, the push factors —as showcased in *Letters*— can mostly be attributed to the dire economic situation in the Mexican

---

[234] As a final comment, it must be noted that in *Letters*, NAFTA veritably becomes a signifier for the United States, particularly when blame is assigned for the women's misfortunes.

[235] As the economic crisis has deepened in the United States, the inflow of migrants from Mexico has indeed decreased (from 1,026 thousand in 2006 to 636 thousand in 2009), as those imagined possibilities of employment have undoubtedly and substantially been reduced. However, the number of Mexican migrants returning to their home country has barely changed in the same time period, as those who are already there prefer to take their chances in *el Norte* rather than in their places of origin. Source: <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=112>

countryside.[236] Even if Eugenia's story could be viewed as focusing more consistently and personally on this feeling of "loss to the United States," the other narratives clearly also show the consequences of the absence of their loved ones. And yet, although the film makes a point of showcasing *all* of the women's perceptiveness about many different aspects of Mexican migration, it usually falls to Eugenia —possibly because of the documentary's narrative focus on her— to underscore crucial opinions about this issue.

For instance, towards the end of *Letters*, Eugenia visits the town of Apaseo el Alto with her youngest daughter Jessica. There, the camera pans to a shot of a quite dilapidated white statue supposedly depicting a migrant couple. Eugenia sadly comments that instead of the town's homage to the migrants, the government should provide more jobs that could help avoid the need for migration. With this statement, Eugenia cleverly draws attention to the binational root of the problem: while the *pull* of the United States may be greatly embedded in the imaginary of sending communities, the actual outcome of this idealized perception may not be as significant if it were not for the failure of the Mexican government to ensure employment to its rural population.[237]

While the representations of the two countries involved in the issue of migration are undoubtedly important to better understand the points of view of the women in *Letters,* one must keep in mind that the film focuses primarily on the *domestic* sphere. It is in this private space that

---

[236] It unfortunately remains to be seen if the incredible increase in violence in urban areas of Mexico (more than 18,000 execution-style murders since Calderón took office) will overtake the lack of economic opportunities in the countryside as the main push factor for migration to the United States. Source:
<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/07/23/index.php?section=sociedad&article=036n1soc>

[237] Eugenia echoes the opinions of many scholars and activists when she highlights Mexico's inaction towards creating proper living conditions that will reduce the flow of migrants to the United States as a key element to understanding the phenomenon of migration. One of these views can be found at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/02/12/fomento.html>

Eugenia, Carmela and Maria define themselves in stark contrast to patriarchal expectations of Mexican women, particularly women who are believed to conform to a model where, in absence of the main —male— provider, they are supposedly marked by their waiting and by their inaction. This traditional feminine depiction may have its roots in an ancient Homeric portrayal of a woman-in-waiting: "As a mythic archetype, the figure of Penelope […] is the idealized faithful wife" (Clayton 83). And yet, even the myth of Penelope has been recently reinterpreted not as a symbol of marital virtue but as "a weaver of narrative," a coder of messages through her weaving and unweaving of Laertes's shroud, a woman, much like the women of *Letters*, best characterized by her *actions* (Clayton 123).[238] One way that the film metaphorically parallels Penelope's "weaving of narrative" is by constructing Carmela's, Eugenia's and Maria's stories as part letter, which normally assumes an exchange of communication between two known interlocutors, and part *testimonio,* which presumes an unknown audience as the recipient of a vital social message. It is important to note that by following this format, the women featured in the documentary are perceived as making their own individual contributions to the fabric of *Letters'* message of denunciation of a social crisis.[239]

It could be argued that one of the reasons why the film's general condemnation of migration is so effective from a narrative perspective is because it bases the strength of its argument in the inseparability of the public and private realms. In Courtney's documentary, one of the strategies used to underscore this melding of the public and the private spaces is through

---

[238] Barbara Clayton's main point in her book *A Penelopean Poetics* (2003) is that Odysseus's wife can be clearly interpreted as a *maker* of stories, because through her delaying tactics of weaving and unweaving she plainly shows her cunning and her impetus as one of the main driving forces behind the *Odyssey*'s narrative.

[239] The *testimonio* as a genre and its importance in Latin American writings has already been discussed in Chapter 3, in reference to *La migra me hizo los mandados*.

the emphasis placed in the aforementioned centrality of the *family* in this particular Mexican rural scenario. A key element in this "family-centered" representation that has not been discussed yet is the figure of the mother. It is quite intriguing to observe that while all of the women highlighted here are mothers, in comparison with *Mujer on the Border,* their motherly roles are not underscored as dramatically.[240] And yet, the stories of Eugenia, Carmela and Maria would not be as convincing within the Mexican cultural context —and therefore, not as effective for the ulterior message of censure of migration that the film wishes to deliver— if they were not somehow related to their portrayals as *mothers*.

In the cases of Eugenia and Carmela, an additional idealization of the depiction brought forth by *Letters* can be perceived, as they are not only mothers but unwilling heads of household, who look after the emotional as well as the economic well-being of their children in the absence of their husbands. Moreover, for Eugenia, there is the further pathos of pining for her children, gone to *el Norte*, while for Carmela, the tragedy of losing her husband to migration is compounded by the pressure of "hacerla de mamá, de papá" ['you have to be [sic] both mother and father'] and having to suppress her feelings of grief in front of her children so as not to further traumatize them.[241] Adding to this representation, the video letter of Eugenia's son demonstrates that the very Mexican cult to the mother is still quite present in this cultural imaginary, as he recognizes all the sacrifices she has made for them. Nevertheless, while their

[240] This absence of the tragic tone can be explained because of the obvious difference in the genres of the two works: fiction and non-fiction. Therefore *Letters*, as a documentary film, will routinely strive to present an "objective" perspective on the problem even while presenting an emotional narrative throughout.

[241] Maria's role as a mother is highlighted in a different way in *Letters* because her husband is still in Mexico. It is the migration of most of her children to the United States and the danger of losing her land because none of her children will work in the fields that makes her motherly role agree more closely with this specific narrative of the film.

children are an evident motivator for these women's actions and these stories of anguished mothers are heartrending per se, motherhood is by no means the main focus of the portrayals of the women in *Letters*. Courtney's film centers instead in their personal transformation into *subjects* with a circumscribed agency within a very *traditional* cultural context that is sustaining significant change due to the overarching effects of migration.

The exact nature of the conservatism in the small towns depicted in the documentary is made clearer if we consider the absence of any reference to female sexuality in the lives of the women featured in *Letters*. Not surprisingly, the one (rather vague) allusion to sexual activity in the documentary is with respect to a man ―Héctor, Eugenia's estranged husband. Eugenia remembers being told of his cheating ways in the United States by their son. Eugenia relates this piece of information rather stoically to the camera, almost as if it had been an expected outcome of her husband's trip to *el Norte*. The flagrant double standards of sexual expectations for men and for women within Mexican society at large become quite obvious as part of the widespread image/stereotype of the male migrant. Sociologist David Fitzgerald notes that "The loosening of family bonds generally and the absence of watchful wives in particular are […] thought to promote vice and immorality among men [who migrate to the North]" (134). Conversely, there appears to be a strong expectation that the women left behind, as imagined within this patriarchal society, should be prominent pillars of virtue and morality. This may explain to some degree the lack of references to sexuality within the narratives of the women of *Letters,* as this would be an aspect of their lives which, if made public, would be incredibly detrimental to their standing within their community and as guardians of their family unity.[242]

[242] That the fictional counterpart to these women, Aurora in *Mujer on the Border*, is "allowed" to make at least one sexual allusion could be interpreted as confirming her position as a lonely outcast within her social group.

While it is clear that the women featured in Courtney's documentary all share this avoidance to disclosing any information pertaining to their sexual lives, there are other common aspects of their portrayals that should be highlighted when analyzing the film as a whole. The most salient features that Eugenia, Carmela and Maria have in common can be grouped as part of their performance of a "realistic agency." Thus, the women of *Letters* are shown to achieve relative empowerment through their efforts to attain socioeconomic independence, despite the fact that none of them had the intention of being self-sufficient before they had to deal with the actual consequences of the migration of their loved ones. At the same time, the documentary emphasizes as a common trait among these women the importance they place on the preservation of family ties, clearly considering the family —in whichever modified state it might be— as an essential value to be protected for their long-term well-being. Finally, the film makes a point of showcasing how all of these women are aware of the larger sociopolitical processes at play in their personal misfortunes derived from migration: from NAFTA to the immigration laws of the United States to the Mexican government's indifference or ineptitude to ensure adequate employment in rural areas.

As for the women's individual differences, it seems they are underlined within the context of *Letters* not only to make the overall narrative flow better but also to make it more diverse and realistic. Therefore, these personal portrayals are richer and more complex in their ambiguities with respect to the variety of issues the documentary touches on. For instance, Eugenia is consistently depicted as more aware of the patriarchal balance of power that constrains women within a traditional Mexican family and yet she seems to wholeheartedly embrace quite conventional models of suffering motherhood, as well as the idealization of family unity —a great irony as hers is arguably the household most affected by migration as multiple

members have left. Carmela, then, is distinctive in being both the woman who is most honoring of the memory of her migrant husband and the one that better grasps the bigger picture of migration as the responsibility of both countries. Lastly, while Maria appears to be the one who shows the least emotional response to the question of migration, it must be recalled that she is also the only one whose husband has not left and that the work she does for the textile cooperative is not what her family's subsistence depends on. These two factors of economic and psychological support make her situation unique among the women represented in the film. In the end, though, the disparities between Eugenia, Carmela and Maria are not as considerable as to deviate from one basic suggestion which underlies the message of *Letters*: that as modern Mexican Penelopes of sorts, they have forsaken their expected waiting for their men to return from their journeys. One could imagine that even if their loved ones could return, the women would not be "recognizable" to them, perhaps signaling the birth of a new kind of rural woman.

4.3 ***"Ahora estoy sola, sola sin ti. /Hoy te vi partir."***[243] **The dialectics of the woman who did not leave.**

Mexican migration to the United States is a social phenomenon that simultaneously exists in a series of indeterminate physical locations that in turn originate a multitude of cultural settings where individuals and communities are reimagined as a response to their contact with *el otro lado*. Women who are attached to this experience by virtue of their loved ones who migrate make a conscious choice —despite their apparent lack of options— not to leave their families or towns behind. In doing so, they take it upon themselves —consciously or unconsciously— to perpetuate *family* as "a collective principle of construction of collective reality" that they hold on to notwithstanding the thousands of miles —or even the occurrence of death— that may separate the members of the household (Bourdieu 66). Given this deep connection to family that Mexican women traditionally espouse, it is not surprising that the representations of these women are at first glance among the most conservative ones associated in some way with the U.S.-Mexico border. Furthermore, since the rural areas where the majority of these portrayals are situated are also the least receptive to sociocultural change, one could easily have anticipated quite conventional depictions of the women who did not depart.

And yet, *la frontera*, with all of its revolutionary energy, manages to seep into the constructions of the women who stayed, therefore attesting to the presence of an unlikely cultural battleground in the Mexican heartland. In this scenario, women like Aurora, Carmela, Eugenia and Maria offer contestation as well as compliance to traditional feminine roles such as that of the abnegated mother and the dutiful wife. Moreover, texts such as *Mujer on the Border* and *Letters from the Other Side* comment forcefully on the larger issues that touch upon Mexican migration to the United States without overlooking the private sphere where this globalized

[243] From the song "Mojado" by Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio.

phenomenon comes from or in which it has such a devastating impact. The remarks made by both texts on all the problems related to this migratory flow —the incompetence or the unwillingness of both governments to address successfully this situation, the socioeconomic forces that ultimately encourage it or the negotiations that cultural identities must undergo as a consequence of it— have a further relevance when one acknowledges that these statements are made by women.

Nevertheless, to signal the arrival of a new, empowered representation of Mexican rural women affected by migration would be quite premature, as these portrayals are still heavily influenced by stereotypes which prescribe that women should be controlled by the collectivity "en ausencia de los guardianes masculinos de su moralidad" ['in the absence of the masculine guardians of their morality'] (Marroni 35). Therefore —and particularly in small towns— female sexuality is closely watched and any real or imagined indiscretion is strictly chastised, which leads to some women left behind isolating themselves from their community as a form of self-protection. As has been previously noted, cultural texts that depict these women are remarkably scarce in explicit mentions of female sexuality. It would appear then that women's empowerment in these cases can only be accepted if it is kept asexual, as female sexuality proves to be too much of a destabilizing factor for a society already strained by the effects of globalization through migration. And still, these few depictions persist in their gendered dialectics of subversion *and* submission to established sociocultural mores that would try to have the women quietly waiting for an improbable return. Instead, these women —and, figuratively, their portrayals— speak with their actions while they stand their ground and reinvent themselves, refusing to play solely the part of demure feminine bulwarks of the homeland.

Conclusion. *Tras-pasando la frontera*: Women beyond the crossroads.

The U.S-Mexico border is at once monumental divider and prime locus for the crossing of identities with respect to gender, nationality and responses to cultural and economic globalization. The analysis of the texts explored in this study examined how the figures of Mexican border women paradoxically contribute to both erasing *and* reifying sexualized and maternal stereotypes while also performing a circumscribed agency that fits the inherent ambivalence of the border. In other words, given that *la frontera* appears to uncannily bring the margins to the center and vice versa, these portrayals were shown to also play out that paradox by embodying —to different extents— both subversion and stereotype. More specifically, the present dissertation revised the question of women at the border as it considered how these depictions perform the thematic axes of gender, globalization and national identity.[244] Moreover, the examination of stereotype in the images of Mexican border women revealed the fear *and* the desire enacted by specific border powers, as well as the ambivalence of stereotype that *may* resist the "fixity" that hegemonic views attempt to impose to representations (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 66).

For instance, in chapter 1, on the women in Juárez, the effects that the prevalent violence in that city has had on the representations of its women were explored. In this case, the specific stereotype of the silent, helpless victim of feminicide was shown to have pervasively affected even those portrayals, like that of the activist, that could conceivably have been construed with greater agency as they speak for the victims. A possible solution that would transcend this stereotype would require a future re-imagining of the activist as a "public woman" who detaches

[244] Another definition of identity that seems particularly well suited to the representations studied here contends that "identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the *other* before it can construct itself" (Hall, "The local" 21, emphasis mine).

herself from the patriarchal stigma that encloses women in private spaces —lest they be sexualized and thus, discounted— while keeping the "emotional legitimacy" that their (often maternal) connection to the victims ensures. In contrast, in the chapter that dealt with the women of Tijuana, the stereotypically sexualized and economically marginalized "public women" were reinterpreted in the analyzed texts in a way that presented paradoxical spaces for interstitial agency in the performance of gender and of the effects of globalization in their everyday lives. As for the women migrants, the representational outcomes of migration showed that while certain images based on a stereotypically melodramatic, self-sacrificing motherhood actually promoted an anti-Malinche notion of a "proper" *mexicanidad para mujeres*, other depictions "embraced" their *malinchista* association due to their partiality towards supposedly "non-Mexican" ideals or because of their acts of cultural translation. In any case, this research hinted that the portrayals of *migrantes-mexicanas*-as-Malinches could in fact symbolize the subversion of traditional cultural and gendered expectations for Mexican women, expectations threatened merely by virtue of their *crossing*. Finally, in the case of the women in rural Mexico who are affected by the migration of their relatives to the United States, their representations were shown to be the most ambivalent with respect to their performance of traditional gender and cultural roles, since on the one hand family values of unity were always emphasized but on the other hand these portrayals contested stereotypes of passivity due to their agency that emerged from the margins and their uncompromising critique of globalization.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the study of the portrayals at the center of this dissertation vis-à-vis the imaginary produced by the U.S.-Mexico border. Firstly, upon examination of the motives behind the production of the cultural texts studied here, it is quite remarkable to note that the majority of these texts were produced with a more or less explicit

social agenda: a call for society's response and possible reform. For example, the texts on Juárez (*Desert Blood* and *La batalla de las cruces*) call attention to the feminicides; the other two documentaries (*Maquilápolis* and *Letters from the Other Side*) showcase the situation on the maquiladoras in Tijuana and of the women affected by migration; *Bread and Roses,* explores issues of labor organizing in L.A.; *La migra me hizo los mandados,* presents the stories and the problems faced by undocumented immigrants and *Mujer on the Border,* displays the plight of the families affected by migration. Thematically, then, the issues of migration, globalized labor and feminicide are brought to the fore with a perspective that, in general, blames economic globalization and the ambivalence inherent to the immigration policies in the United States for most of the social woes that Mexican women face. It could be argued that the more nuanced texts —the documentaries, given that their format allows for a more in-depth exploration of a particular issue— differ from the rest in that they are able to assign responsibility for this detrimental situation on a variety of Mexican actors in a more *deliberate* way than the fictional accounts and the testimonials do, simply because of the "limitations" of their genres.[245]

The success of these texts at exposing the social concerns that they focus on is unequal at best, possibly due to their relatively limited audience. One explanation for their "impopularity" may be related to their failure to use "acceptable" cultural cues that facilitate consumption on both sides of the border, such as melodrama and a conventional representation of Mexican motherhood, in the way that *La misma luna* does. Being that this is the one text examined in this dissertation that is successful in reaching a large audience, this may lead us to believe that *La misma luna* could be more effective in advancing a social message than the more "profound"

[245] In other words, the play, the novel and the testimonial follow the expectations of their respective genres in presenting a consciously *partial* point of view, while the documentary films (even if they cannot escape the partiality of their directors' vision) are required by genre to provide a variety of perspectives on the issue.

texts. Yet, one must remember that creating awareness of migration is ultimately *not* the main purpose of Riggen's movie. Instead, its chief objective, as per its genre as a commercial film, is to be viewed by as many people as possible and one could suppose that this goal would effectively override other interests. Moreover, the problematic representations of women that this film promotes, such as the conventionally/conveniently Mexican, self-sacrificing, "virginal" mother who is the main character of *La misma luna*, make it a less than ideal candidate for furthering a social cause. In contrast with Riggen's conventional portrayals of women, the only other text that does not have an overt social agenda, the short stories by Rosina Conde, is unique in its subversion of patriarchal expectations from the position of an uncompromising feminism that *performs* the sexualized and stereotyped representations of women in Tijuana. From a literary perspective, much like the texts with socially-aware undertones, these stories do not aim to facilitate general consumption of their depictions by making them palatable either.

Additionally, some portrayals stand out for either their ability or their inability to transcend stereotypes of victimization and sexualization. It is quite notable then that both the novel and the documentary that focus on Juárez originate from an academic source —which may reflect popular images but definitely offer more nuanced insights— particularly since these texts reflect both the "worst" depictions and the worst situation "on-the-ground." It would appear that academic "producers" of cultural texts are not able to imagine representations of *juarense* women in a light that allows for interstitial agency, and one could only wonder if these disempowered depictions originate from excess pessimism or realism... It is also remarkable that both *Desert Blood* and *La batalla de las cruces* attribute the greatest responsibility for the feminicide to their respective "home-grown" agents; namely, globalization in the former case and the Mexican authorities in the latter one. Perhaps one could impute a certain "nativist" bias

to these sources, but an alternative interpretation would also consider that the blame in these texts responds to the preferred area of expertise of the academics that created these texts. As for the more empowered representations of border women, it may not be entirely surprising to find them amongst the "self-representations" of *Maquilápolis* and *La migra*, as these texts allow for the occupancy of actual subject positions (albeit mediated) and for the capability of these women of exercising their voice to construct their own issues and to a point, their own depictions. Having considered the previous points in detail in the body of the dissertation we can conclude that this analysis effectively showed how essential the representation of Mexican border women is to the understanding of the mechanics of cultural production and consumption with relation to the U.S.-Mexico border.

On a different note, since the figure of *la madre mexicana* appears in all of the analyzed texts in a significant way, we could assert that this study has contributed to identifying the diverse cultural negotiations embodied by this iconic character while crossing and being crossed by the U.S.-Mexico border. While the degree of protagonism of the mothers may vary in the texts, we do find a range of characterizations that goes from the most victimized and abjected Mexican mothers of *Desert Blood* to the proto-feminist stance and relative economic autonomy of Eugenia in *Letters from the Other Side.* Furthermore, even when traditional abnegation and a great deal of cultural compliance is displayed in a representation like *La misma luna*'s Rosario, it would seem that *la frontera* seeps in to infuse the characters with its ambivalence, as Rosario's emotional and economic independence from men muddles her status as a "perfect" representative of patriarchal expectations and *mexicanidad*. Other cultural negotiations that these border mothers made can be appreciated in the displaced revenge of the grieving mother in *Mujer on the Border*, the radical transformation from exploited to empowered in "Señora Nina," the

maternally-motivated positioning as “public women” of the activists in *Maquilápolis* and *La batalla de las cruces* and even the uncomfortable defense of her family at the cost of her sexualization that Rosa undertakes in *Bread and Roses*. In conclusion, the portrayal of *la madre mexicana* becomes permeated with a typically *fronterizo* disturbance of fear and desired margins, a disturbance that in reality affects border representations as a whole, given the centrality of this female icon to the Mexican imaginary at large.

The intention of this study was to propose a distinctive approach to the subject of the depictions of Mexican women in the U.S.-Mexico border. While there are many recent studies that center on *la frontera* and several others that concentrate on women’s portrayals, my analysis differed in its breadth, as it covers nine different texts in formats as varied as feature films, documentaries, short stories, novel, theatrical monologue and testimonial literature. The selection of the texts obeyed to the driving principle of reflecting a variety of representations and of cultural products, in Spanish and in English, from Mexico and from the United States. The texts were originally chosen with the purpose of studying relatively recent and heterogeneous perspectives and approaches to the particular problematic issues surrounding each one of the representations at the center of this dissertation: the pervasive image of the victim in the case of the women of Juárez, the paradox of the scorned “public woman” for *las tijuanenses*, the *malinchista* associations of the women migrants and the “stigma” of abandonment and helplessness for *las que se quedaron*. Unconsciously though, the intent of selecting texts that not only presented unique outlooks to these questions but also offered re-readings and alternatives to typically negative and disempowered representations of Mexican border women, turned out a corpus that was more homogeneous than expected both in their intended audiences and, as aforementioned, in the motivations behind their production. Specifically, the vast majority of

these cultural texts would have had their ideal consumers in middle-class intellectuals (both from Mexico and the United States) and this could be considered one of the limitations of the present study, which will be discussed in more detail shortly.

Continuing with the singularities of this study, it could be argued that by approaching this research from the lenses of feminism and cultural studies, we have made a contribution to these fields by proposing a perspective that earnestly suggests an examination of alternative avenues for the performance of agency within the representational realm. In doing so, this dissertation hopefully transcended both particularisms and essentialisms and thus presented a balanced assessment on the matter of the portrayals of Mexican women at the border. As for the way this study has contributed to Chicana/o Studies and to Mexican studies, one could maintain that by considering texts from both sides of the border, in both Spanish and English, the analyses presented here have helped to elucidate what sometimes are overlooked or even disparaged participations from *el otro lado*. Finally, by identifying the appearance of paradox and ambivalence in the depictions of Mexican border women as a distinct feature shared by them all this study is arguably making a modest but original contribution to the field of border studies. It is through the references to the paradoxical representations of the women of Juárez and Tijuana, with the use of such a contradictory figure as La Malinche in chapter 3 and with the application of terms such as the "gendered ambivalence" of Aurora in *Mujer on the Border* or the "agency from the margins" of the women of *Letters from the Other Side,* that this study proposes that the characteristics of paradox and ambivalence are universal among the representation of Mexican border women. All of these endeavors correspond within the more progressive scholarship on the border as I attempted to engage in conversations with diverse disciplines and viewpoints, places

of origin and destinations, keeping in mind the symbolic spatiality that so completely permeates all matters related with *la frontera*.

This project, with its particular emphasis on Mexican women's representations vis-à-vis the U.S.-Mexico border, necessarily did not attend to a number of recent questions in a field that grows exponentially almost day-by-day. For instance, considering Mexican men's portrayals through the viewpoint of masculinity studies could have developed another perspective to the question of border identities. Additionally, the focus on Mexican depictions, while inevitably touching on issues concerning the U.S-American side, did not fully explore the margin-within-the-center that would correspond to a more nuanced assessment of figures that do not automatically need to be hegemonic. Finally, it was virtually impossible to keep up to date and thus include a response in this work to the latest momentous social, political, cultural and economic developments happening in Mexico and in the United States in relation to their border and beyond. For instance, while every effort was made to consider the horrifyingly increasing death toll of people killed in Mexico because of the "war" on organized crime that President Calderón declared in 2006 (an estimated 40,000 in June 30, 2011), to take fully into account the effect of this tragic situation in the national and border imaginaries may have very well meant to start all over again.[246] And yet in many ways, the onslaught of violence in Mexico has made this analysis and its conclusions even more relevant as the violence has been seen to reinforce the mechanics of terror that has rendered women in Juárez as silent victims. Besides, the reactions of solidarity and social activism of the Mexican people are beginning to change the representational landscape surrounding this violence and the discourse of the authorities, reflecting more

[246] Source: <www.jornada.unam.mx>

empowered and socially-conscious portrayals such as the ones shown in *Maquilápolis* or in *Letters from the Other Side*.

It is probably in the nature of research to instigate even more interrogations than those that initiate the study in question. As aforementioned, the manifestation of paradox and ambivalence in the images of Mexican border women seems to be the most common and distinguishable trait they exhibit and therefore an appropriate starting point for further explorations, ones which I believe would benefit the most from a more interdisciplinary approach. I envision these future studies as able to discuss more seamlessly the interrelations and dependencies between the "real" world and the "represented" one. In addition, studies that came after this one would have the opportunity to explore whether the conclusions I arrived to still hold in other, more commercial, media such as songs, more feature films, TV series or even performance pieces.

What is probably the main limitation of the present study is directly related to the proposed directions for future research. Having considered only one unequivocally "popular" text —*La misma luna*— a true variety of perspectives in cultural production was not entirely attained. That being said, if one bears in mind that the portrayals of border women in this movie were the most stereotypical amongst those analyzed and that the depictions in the other texts could be seen as set against the more negative representations of border women, it could be argued that the lack of variety in the cultural products was offset by a diversity in representation that considered both the stereotype and the resistance to the stereotype. Likewise, it could be contended that another drawback of this study resulted from covering too many portrayals of Mexican border women and therefore the number of images analyzed should have been circumscribed to the ones that strictly corresponded to the border area (i.e. Tijuana and Juárez),

an approach that may have resulted in a deeper examination of the issues encountered. Furthermore, by incorporating the theoretical methodologies into the content chapters instead of containing them in one independent section, this study opted for an uncommon practicality that allowed for greater hermeneutical flexibility but could have also been confusing for the reader.

In the end, the strongest motivation for this work lay on the ideal that "feminist scholarship […] seeks not only to reinterpret, but to change the world" (Greene and Kahn 2). In this sense, I would hope that these analyses will one day expand and/or show the way for a cooperative future that embraces and takes advantage of representational ambivalence so that the disempowered —understanding empowerment in the Freiran sense—may transform power structures through processes of consciousness raising and thus gain greater control.

> "Entre las estrategias de empoderamiento destaca la construcción de identidades colectivas, […] que se logra a través de la identificación entre mujeres que comparten la misma problemática." ['Among the strategies of empowerment one must emphasize the construction of collective identities, […] which is achieved through the identification of women who share the same concerns'] (Martínez Corona 162).

Women, even as fictional characters, need not to face challenges alone. Being crisscrossed by the U.S.-Mexico border creates similar anxieties and problems for the identities of Mexican border women. Even while attending to the specific differences/discontinuities amongst the identities that are constructed primarily from *living* the border, *crossing* it or being virtually *crossed* by it, the parallel difficulties and concerns of all these identities can be addressed by sharing alternative answers and options that go beyond the silence of the victim, beyond the abnegation of the mother, beyond the "*malinchismo*" of the migrants, beyond the supposed shame of the "public woman." I trust that the more negative depictions analyzed in this work can serve as a

lesson on the effects of the power plays executed in *la frontera* while the more positive —even the more ambivalent— portrayals can show the way for displacements and/or disruptions of a status quo that perpetuates victimized images of women, images that have an undeniable (if hard to measure) deleterious effect in “real life.”

WORKS CITED

WORKS CITED

A Better Life. Dir. Chris Weitz. Depth of Field, 2011. Film.

Alarcón, Alicia, comp. *La migra me hizo los mandados.* Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2002. Print.

---. *The border patrol ate my dust*. Trans. Ethriam Cash Brammer de Gonzales. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2004. Print.

Alicia Alarcón Home Page. "Biografía." Web. June 6th, 2008. http://aliciaalarcon.com/biografia

Alarcón, Norma. "Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism." *Cultural Critique.* 13 (Autumn 1989): 57-87. Print.

Alegría, Juana Armanda. "La sexualidad de la mexicana." Comp. Roger Bartra. *Anatomía del Mexicano.* Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 2002. 273-280. Print.

Amnesty International USA. *Death Penalty Facts*. Updated June, 2009. Web. June 29, 2009. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/abolish/factsheets/DeathPenaltyFacts.pdf>

Amnistía Internacional. *Muertes intolerables—México: 10 años de desapariciones y asesinatos de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez y Chihuahua.* London: Amnesty International, 2003. Print.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.

Arreola, Daniel D. and James R. Curtis. "Tourist Landscapes." Ed. Oscar J. Martínez. *US-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Jaguar Books on Latin America; no. 11. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996. 236-243. Print.

Artista Plástico Alejandro Santiago. Homepage. Web June 14, 2010. <http://alejandrosantiago.com.mx/proyectos.html>

Ariza, Marina. "Itinerario de los estudios de género y migración en México." *El País Transnacional: Migración Mexicana y Cambio Social a Través de la Frontera.* Coords. Marina Ariza y Alejandro Portes. México, D.F.: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales-UNAM, 2007. 453-511. Print.

Babel. Screenplay by Guillermo Arriaga. Dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu. Perf. Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, and Adriana Barraza. Paramount, 2006. DVD.

Balslev Clausen, Helene. "Mexican *Mestizo* Identity in the Twenty-first Century." *The Politics, Economics, and Culture of Mexican-U.S. Migration: Both Sides of the Border*. Eds. Edward Ashbee, Helene Balslev Clausen, and Carl Pedersen. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 25-36. Print.

Bartoli, Víctor. *Mujer alabastrina.* Chihuahua, Chih., México: Instituto Chihuahuense de la Cultura, 1998. Print.

Bartow, Joanna R. "Essential Subversions: Reading Theory with Latin American Women's Testimonial Discourse." *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*. Eds. Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004. 47-61. Print.

Benítez, Rohry, et al. *El silencio que la voz de todas quiebra.* Chihuahua, Chih., México: Ediciones del Azar, 1999. Print.

Berg, Charles Ramírez. *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992. Print.

---. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002. Print.

Beverly, John. "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative)." *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Ed. Georg M. Gugelberger. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996. 23-41. Print.

Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration.* New York: Routledge, 1990. 291-322. Print.

---. *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

---. "Culture's in-Between?" *Questions of Cultural Identity.* Eds. Hall, Stuart and du Gay, Paul. London: Sage, 1996. 53-60. Print.

Bolaño, Roberto. *2666.* Barcelona: Anagrama, 2004. Print.

Bonilla, Rafael. "Síntesis: *La batalla de las cruces*." *Web page.* June 2008. Web. October 31st, 2008. <http://www.uam.es/boletin/index_archivos/Sintesis.doc.>

Bordertown. Dir. Gregory Nava. Möbius Entertainment, 2006. DVD.

Bordwell, David. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 2nd edition. New York: Knopf, 1986. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. Print.

"Box office/business for Misma luna, La (2007)." *Internet Movie Database.* Web. March 24, 2009. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0796307/business>

Brah, Avtar. "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities." *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader.* Eds. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills. New York: Routledge, 2003. 613-634. Print.

Bread and Roses. Dir. Ken Loach. Parallax Pictures, 2000. DVD.

Bustamante, Jorge A. *Cruzar la línea: La migración de México a los Estados Unidos*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Cárdenas, Esteban. "*Bajo la Misma Luna* (sic) es el equivalente en cine de Taco Bell" *Vanguardia.com.* March 24th, 2008. Web. October 1st, 2008. <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/diario/detalle/blog/bajo_la_misma_luna_es_el_equivalente_en_cine_de_taco_bell/140769>

Cardoso, Víctor. "Cayeron remesas en noviembre al peor nivel desde febrero de 2005." *La Jornada*. January 5, 2010. Web. January 6, 2010. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/01/05/index.php?section=economia&article=014n1eco>

Castillo, Debra A. *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. Print.

---. *Easy women: sex and gender in modern Mexican fiction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Print.

---, et. al. "Vidas fronterizas: Mujeres prostitutas de Tijuana." Ed. Mabel Moraña. *Nuevas Perspectivas desde / sobre América Latina: El Desafío de los Estudios Culturales.* Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2000. 233-260. Print.

---, and Tabuenca Córdoba, María Socorro. *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera.* Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Print.

Castillo García, Gustavo. "Más de 18 mil ejecuciones en lo que va del sexenio, revelan cifras oficiales." *La Jornada.* February 5, 2010. Web. April 28, 2010. http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/02/05/index.php?section=politica&article=007n3pol

Cerrutti, Marcela and Douglas S. Massey. "Trends in Mexican Migration to the United States, 1965 to 1999." *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project.* Eds. Durand, Jorge and Douglas S. Massey. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004. 17-44. Print.

Chang, Justin. "*Under the Same Moon*: Movie review from the Sundance Film Festival." *Variety.com.* January 23rd, 2007. Web. October 2nd, 2008. <http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=festivals&jump=review&id=2471&reviewid=VE1117932536&cs=1&p=0>

Chang, Kimberly A. and L.H.M. Ling. "Globalization and its Intimate Other: Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong." *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances.* Eds. Marianne H. Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 2011. 30-47. Print.

Cisneros, Sandra. *Caramelo.* New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2002. Print.

Ciudad Juárez. *Home Page.* "Negocios, Industria Maquiladora." Web. October 17th, 2008. <http://www.juarez.gob.mx/negocios/industria.php>

Ciudad Juárez: Tan infinito como el desierto. TV Azteca, 2004. Television.

Clayton, Barbara. *A Penelopean poetics: Reweaving the feminine in Homer's Odyssey.* Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003. Print.

CONAPO. "Tendencias y características de la migración mexicana a Estados Unidos." *Migración México-Estados Unidos: Panorama regional y estatal.* November, 2005. Web. June 12, 2008. <http://www.conapo.gob.mx/publicaciones/migra2006_01/01.pdf>

Conde, Rosina. *Embotellado de origen.* México, D.F.: CONACULTA, 1994. Print.

---. *Arrieras somos.* Difocur, Culiacán, México: 1994. Print.

---. *La Genara.* Tijuana: CONACULTA/CECUT, 1998. Print.

---. *En la tarima.* México, D.F.: Desliz Ediciones, 2001. Print.

---. *Como cashora al sol*. México, D.F.: Desliz Ediciones, 2007. Print.

---. Performance: "Señorita Maquiladora." (1996) Web. 22 February 2007. <http://www.rosinaconde.com.mx/mm.htm>.

Contreras, Sheila. Class Lecture. *Border Literatures.* Department of American Studies, Michigan State University. Spring 2005.

Corbin, Alain. "Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth Century France." *The Making of the modern body: Sexuality and society in the nineteenth century.* Eds. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. 209-219. Print.

Courtney, Heather. "Director's Statement." Official webpage: *Letters from the Other Side*. Web. February 18, 2010. <http://www.sidestreetfilms.com/download/lftos_directorsStatement.pdf>

Criterios. "Aumentan feminicidios en Ciudad Juárez." November 25th, 2007. *Criterios*. Web. December 4th, 2007. <http://criterios.com/modules.php?name=Noticias&file=article&sid=13113>

Crosthwaite, Luis Humberto et al. eds. *Puro Border: Dispatches, Snapshots & Graffiti from La Frontera.* El Paso, Tex: Cinco Puntos Press, 2003. Print.

Cuando llegan los mojados. Dir. Alonso Ortiz. Phoenix Entretainment, 2003. DVD.

D'Aubeterre Buznego, María Eugenia. "Migración transnacional, mujeres y reacomodos domésticos." *Con voz propia: Mujeres rurales en los noventa*. Coords. Marroni, María da Gloria y María Eugenia D'Aubeterre Buznego. Puebla, Pue., México: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 2002. 45-68. Print.

Desert Blood. *Home page.* Last updated on Tuesday, November 06, 2007. Web. December 20th, 2007. <http://www.desertblood.info>

Dever, Susan. *Celluloid Nationalism and other Melodramas: From post-revolutionary Mexico to fin de siglo Mexamérica.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. Print.

Doezema, Jo. "Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary v. Forced Prostitution Dichotomy." *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*. Eds. Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema. New York: Routledge, 1998. 34-50. Print.

Durand, Jorge and Douglas S. Massey, eds. *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004. Print.

El jardín del Edén. Dir. María Novarro. Perf. Renée Coleman, Bruno Bichir, and Gabriela Roel. Videovisa, 1994. DVD.

El Norte. Dir Gregory Nava. American Playhouse, 1983. DVD.

"Elogios, a *La misma luna*, de la cineasta mexicana Patricia Riggen." *Proceso.com.mx* March 11, 2008. Web. April 30, 2009. <http://proceso.com.mx/noticias_articulo.php?articulo=57765>

Erichsen, Gerald. "*La misma luna* Breaks U.S. Opening-Weekend Record for Spanish-Language Cinema." March 28, 2008. *About.com. Guide.* Web. April 30, 2009.

Everyone Their Grain of Sand. Dir. Beth Bird. Women Make Movies, 2005. DVD.

Fagetti, Antonella. "Los cambiantes significados de la maternidad en el México rural." *Relaciones de género y transformaciones agrarias: Estudios sobre el campo mexicano*. Coords. González Montes, Soledad y Vania Salles. México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios sobre la Mujer, 1995. 301-337. Print.

Falcón, Sylvanna M. "Rape as a Weapon of War: Militarized Rape at the U.S.-Mexico Border." *Women and Migration in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: A Reader*. Eds. Segura, Denise A. and Patricia Zavella. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 203-223. Print.

Fitzgerald, David. *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages its Migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Print.

Fojas, Camilla. "Borderlined in the Global City (of Angels)." *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City.* Eds. Çinar, Alev and Thomas Bender. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 37-54. Print.

Foss, Karen A. "Celluloid Rhetoric: The Use of Documentary Film to Teach Rhetorical Theory." *66th Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association. New York, NY, November 13-16, 1980.* Web. ERIC Clearinghouse, 1980.

Fourez, Cathy. "La construcción literaria del basurero en el norte de México: el lugar de la "ex-pulsión" de la barbarie." *Fronteras, violencia, justicia: Nuevos discursos.* Coord. Marisa Belausteguigoitia y Lucía Melgar. 2a. edición. México, D.F: UNAM, 2008. 67-92. Print.

Fregoso, Rosa Linda. "Voices without Echo: The Global Gendered Apartheid." *Emergences.* 10.1 (2000): 137-155. Print.

---. *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Print.

---. "'We Want Them Alive!': The Politics and Culture of Human Rights." *Social Identities.* 12.2 (March 2006): 109-138. Print.

García Canclini, Néstor. *Hybrid cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity.* Trans. Christopher L. Chippari and Silvia L. López. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. Print.

---. *La globalizacion imaginada.* México: Paidós, 2000. Print.

---. *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts.* Trans. George Yudice. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. Print.

García, Gustavo V. *La literatura testimonial latinoamericana: (Re) presentación y (auto) construcción del sujeto subalterno*. Madrid: Ed. Pliegos, 2003. Print.

Gaspar de Alba, Alicia. *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders.* Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 2005. Print.

Genzlinger, Neil. "Just Across the Border, Mexican Laborers Work Cheap But Fight Hard." Rev. of *Maquilápolis (City of Factories)*. *New York Times (Late Edition (East Coast))*. New York, N.Y.: Sep 26, 2006. p. E.5 ProQuest. Michigan State University Library system. Web. 10 Dec. 2008. <http://ezproxy.msu.edu:2047/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1135257411&Fmt=18&clientId=3552&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. Print.

Goldín, Liliana. "Maquilápolis (City of Factories)." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 12.2 (2007): 546-547. Social Science Module. ProQuest. Michigan State University Library system. Web. 10 Dec. 2008. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/>

González Montes, Soledad y Vania Salles. "Introducción." *Relaciones de género y transformaciones agrarias: Estudios sobre el campo mexicano*. México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios sobre la Mujer, 1995. 15-50. Print.

González Rodríguez, Sergio. *Huesos en el desierto.* 3rd edition. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2005. Print.

---. y César Cansino, coords. "Las muertas de Juárez."*Metapolítica/Fuera de Serie.* (Octubre, 2003). Print.

Greene, Gayle, and Coppélia Kahn. "Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Woman." *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn. London: Methuen, 1985. 1-36. Print.

Gutmann, Matthew C. "Introduction: Discarding Manly Dichotomies in Latin America." *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 1-26. Print.

H. Ayuntamiento de Tijuana, B.C., México. *Home Page.* Web. November 20th, 2008.

Hai, Ambreen. *Making Words Matter: The Agency of Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity" *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Ed. Anthony D. King. Binghamton: Dept. of Art and Art History, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1991. 19-39. Print.

---. “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?” *Questions of Cultural Identity.* Eds. Hall, Stuart and du Gay, Paul. London: Sage, 1996. 1-17. Print.

---. “The Work of Representation.” *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997. 13-74. Print.

Herrera Beltrán, Claudia. “Abre Calderón 2008 con defensa del TLCAN, “que ha sido benéfico.” *La Jornada*. January 8, 2008. Web. July 13, 2009. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/01/08/index.php?section=politica&article=003n1pol >

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrete. *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration.* Berkeley, California: University of California Press: 1994. Print.

Inda, Jonathan Xavier. “The Value of Immigrant Life.” *Women and Migration in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: A Reader*. Eds. Segura, Denise A. and Patricia Zavella. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 134-158. Print.

INEGI. *Mujeres y hombres en México, 2009*. Web. July 8, 2009. <http://cedoc.inmujeres.gob.mx/documentos_download/100976.pdf>

---. “Tema: Sociodemografía y género.” *Información estadística*. Web. January 6, 2010. <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/soc/sis/sisept/default.aspx?t=mhog05&c=9495&e=>

INMUJERES. *¿Quiénes viven solos(as) en México?* June 2005. Web. July 8, 2009. <http://cedoc.inmujeres.gob.mx/documentos_download/100721.pdf>

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex which is not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. Print.

Johnson, Reed. “Neither Here nor There.” June 11th, 2004. *Los Angeles Times*. Web. November 19th, 2008. http://articles.latimes.com/2004/06/11/calendar/et-johnson11

Kernion, Jette. “SXSW Review: *Letters from the Other Side.*” *Cinematical.* 12 March 2006. Web. 23 June 2009. http://www.cinematical.com/2006/03/12/sxsw-review-letters-from-the-other-side/

King, Anthony D. “Boundaries, networks, and cities: Playing and replaying diasporas and histories.” *Urban imaginaries: locating the modern city.* Eds. Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 1-14. Print.

La batalla de las cruces. Dir. Rafael Bonilla. CIESAS y Campo Imaginario, 2005. DVD.

La tragedia de Macario. Dir. Pablo Veliz. Cinematográfica Veliz, 2005. DVD.

Lagarde, Marcela. *Cautiverios de las mujeres: Madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*. México, DF: UNAM, 1990. Print.

Letters from the other side. Dir. Heather Courtney. Front Porch Films, KERA and Independent Television Service (ITVS), 2006. DVD.

Lone Star. Dir. John Sayles. Columbia Tristar, 1996. DVD.

Lopez, Ana M. "Our Welcomed Guests: Telenovelas in Latin America." *To Be Continued… Soap Operas Around the World.* Ed. Robert C. Allen. London: Routledge, 1995. 256-275. Print.

López Estrada, Silvia. "Border Women's NGO's and Political Participation in Baja California." *Women and Change at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Mobility, Labor, and Activism*. Eds. Doreen J. Mattingly and Ellen R. Hansen. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006. 159-177. Print.

López-Lozano, Miguel. "Women in the Global Machine: Patrick Bard's *La Frontera*, Carmen Galán Benítez's *La Tierra Marchita*, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*." *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response.* Eds. Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. 129-151. Print.

Ludmer, Josefina. "Las tretas del débil." *La Sartén por el Mango*. Eds. Patricia Elena González y Eliana Ortega. Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 1984. 47-54. Print.

Maciel, David R. and García-Acevedo, María Rosa. "The Celluloid Immigrant: The Narrative Films of Mexican Immigration." Eds. David R. Maciel and María Herrera-Sobek. *Culture Across Borders: Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998. 149-202. Print.

--- and Herrera-Sobek, María, eds. *Culture Across Borders: Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998. Print.

Maier, Linda S. "Introduction: The Case for and Case History of Women's Testimonial Literature in Latin America." *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*. Eds. Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004. 1-17. Print.

Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio. "Mojado." *Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del 5º Patio.* RCA Intl., 1989. CD.

Maquilápolis: City of Factories. Dir. Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre. California Newsreel and ITVS, 2006. DVD.

Maquilápolis (City of Factories). Homepage. Web. December 11, 2008. <www.maquilapolis.com>

Marchand, Marianne H. and Anne Sisson Runyan. "Introduction: Feminist Sightings of Global Restructuring: Old and New Conceptualizations." *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances.* Eds. Marianne H. Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 2011. 1-24. Print.

Marroni, María da Gloria. "Pobreza rural, mujeres y migración masculina." *Con voz propia: Mujeres rurales en los noventa*. Coords. Marroni, María da Gloria y María Eugenia D'Aubeterre Buznego. Puebla, Pue., México: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 2002. 15-44. Print.

Martín-Barbero, Jesús. "Memory and Form in the Latin American Soap Opera." Trans. Marina Elias. *To Be Continued… Soap Operas Around the World.* Ed. Robert C. Allen. London: Routledge, 1995. 276-285. Print.

---. *De los medios a las mediaciones: Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía.* México: Ediciones G. Gili, 1987.

Martínez, Oscar J. "Introduction." *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Oscar J. Martínez. Jaguar Books on Latin America; no. 11. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996. xiii-xix. Print.

Martínez Corona, Beatriz. "Empoderamiento y sustentabilidad: La experiencia de una organización de mujeres nahuas en la Sierra Norte del Estado de Puebla." *Con voz propia: Mujeres rurales en los noventa*. Coords. Marroni, María da Gloria y María Eugenia D'Aubeterre Buznego. Puebla, Pue., México: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 2002. 159-183. Print.

Matthews, Peter. "Beyond our Ken." *Sight and Sound.* 11.5 (May 2001): 36-37. Print.

Mayer, Mónica y Juan Carlos Reyes. *Las mujeres que no se fueron.* Oax. México: Instituto de la Mujer Oaxaqueña, 2003. Print.

McClennen, Sophia A. "Are Cultural Studies "Against Literature"?: Reading Testimonial and Film in the Latin American Canon." *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*. Eds. Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004. 63-80. Print.

Melgar, Lucía. "Presentación." *Género, cultura y sociedad*. Comp. Lucía Melgar. Serie de Investigaciones del PIEM, Vol. 6. México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer, 2007. 9-16. Print.

---. y Marisa Belausteguigoitia. "Introducción." *Fronteras, violencia, justicia: Nuevos discursos.* Coord. Marisa Belausteguigoitia y Lucía Melgar. 2a. edición. México, D.F: UNAM, 2008. 7-32. Print.

"Melodrama." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. Columbia University Press. Web. 15 Aug. 2008. <Reference.com> http://www.reference.com/browse/columbia/melodram>.

Messinger Cypess, Sandra. *La Malinche in Mexican literature from history to myth*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991. Print.

---. "'Mother' Malinche and Allegories of Gender, Ethnicity and National Identity in Mexico." *Feminism, nation and myth: La Malinche.* Eds. Rolando Romero and Amanda Nolacea Harris. Houston, Tex.: Arte Publico Press, 2005. 14-27. Print.

México: Tierra de Migrantes. Dir. Rafael Illescas. Once TV MEXICO. 2007. Series webpage. Web. January 14, 2010. http://oncetv-ipn.net/migrantes/presentacion/

Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.

"Migration in the 21st Century." *The World in Review: Independent Analysis of Global Events.* Web. 23 April 2009. http://www.theworldinreview.com/images/Global%20Topics/Migrant_Crossing_Sign.jpg

Milagros: Made in Mexico. Dir. Martina Guzmán. 4 Women in Film, 2006. DVD.

Monárrez Fragoso, Julia. "Feminicidio sexual serial en Ciudad Juárez: 1993-2001." *Debate Feminista.* 25 (April 2002): 13-25. Print.

---. "Las diversas representaciones del feminicidio y los asesinatos de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez, 1993-2005." *Sistema socio-económico y geo-referencial sobre la violencia de género en Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua: Propuestas para su prevención.* Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2005: 353-398. CD-ROM.

---. "El sufrimiento de las otras." *Bordeando la violencia contra las mujeres en la frontera norte de México.* Coord. Julia Monárrez Fragoso y María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. Tijuana, Baja California: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2007.115-137. Print.

--- y María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. "Presentación." *Bordeando la violencia contra las mujeres en la frontera norte de México.* Coord. Julia Monárrez Fragoso y María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. Tijuana, Baja California: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2007. 5-17. Print.

Monsiváis, Carlos. "Vino todo el pueblo y no cupo en la pantalla (Notas sobre el público del cine en México)." *A través del espejo: El cine mexicano y su público.* Monsiváis, Carlos y Carlos Bonfil. México, D.F.: Ed. El Milagro, 1994. 49-97. Print.

---. “La identidad nacional frente al espejo.” Comp. Roger Bartra. *Anatomía del mexicano.* Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 2002. 295-301. Print.

Mujer on the border. Dir. María Muro. Adap. María Muro and Marta Aura. Based on “El llanto del verdugo” by Antonio and Javier Malpica. Perf. Marta Aura. Museo Universitario del Chopo, México, D.F. January 20th, 2005. Performance.

Muro, María and Marta Aura. *Mujer on the Border*. Unpublished manuscript. Print.

My Family/Mi Familia. Dir. Gregory Nava. American Playhouse. 1995. DVD.

Newman, Maria. “Immigration Advocates Rally Across U.S.” April 10, 2006. *The New York Times.* Web. January 27, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/10/us/10cnd-rallies.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin

Nichols, Jennifer. “Stuck in Go: The Radical Exclusion of "Mobile Women" in Twentieth-century U.S. Literature.” Diss. Michigan State University, 2007. Print.

Noble, Andrea. *Mexican National Cinema*. New York, Routledge, 2005. Print.

Norandi, Mariana. “*Mujer on the border*, espejo de las situaciones que provoca la migración.” *La Jornada.* January 27, 2005. Web. November 12th, 2009. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/01/27/a15n1esp.php>

Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa. *Documentos.* Last update on December 6th, 2007. Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa Webpage. Web. December 6th, 2007. <http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org>

Olivares, Juan José. “*Mujer on the Border,* más que discurso; hace reflexionar, dice Marta Aura.” *Cinexcusas.* September 1st, 2005. Web. June 30, 2009. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/09/01/a14n1esp.php>

Pacheco, Cristina. *El oro del desierto*. México, D.F.: Plaza y Janés, 2005. Print.

Palaversich, Diana. “La vuelta a Tijuana en seis escritores.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. 28.1 (Spring 2003): 97-125. Print.

Parra, Eduardo. *Tierra de nadie.* México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1999. Print.

Passel, Jeffrey and D'Vera Cohn. “Mexican Immigrants: How Many Come? How Many Leave?” *Publications of the Pew Hispanic Center*. July 22, 2009. Web. April 28, 2010. <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=112>

Paz, Octavio. *El laberinto de la soledad*. 4ª. Edición. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica: 1964. Print.

Pitts, Byron. “Taxpayers Fund Illegal Immigrant Births.” April 7, 2008. *CBS Evening News.* Web. March 19, 2009. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/04/07/eveningnews/main4000400.shtml?source=search_story>

“Presentación. *La batalla de las cruces* (DVD)” *Ichan Tecolotl. Órgano Informativo del Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores de Antropología Social*. 180 (Agosto 2005): 4. Print.

Priewe, Marc. “Making a Home away from Home: Travelling Diasporas in María Escandón’s *Esperanza’s Box of Saints*.” *Amerikastudien/American Studies.* 51.4 (2006): 581-593. Print.

Quart, Leonard, and William Kornblum. “Documenting Workers: Looking at Labor on Film.” *Dissent.* 48.4 (Fall 2001): 117-120. Print.

Rajo, Carlos. “*La Misma Luna* rompe récord de películas en español.” March 28th, 2008. *LatinoBlogs*. Web. October 3rd, 2008. <http://www.aollatinoblog.com/2008/03/28/la-misma-luna-rompe-record-de-peliculas-en-espanol/>

Renov, Michael. Editor. *Theorizing Documentary.* New York, London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

---. “New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-Verité Age.” *Feminism and documentary.* Eds. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 84-95. Print.

Rodríguez, Israel J. “Los subsidios en EU, veinte veces mayores que en México.” *La Jornada*. February 1, 2008. Web. June 10, 2011. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/02/01/index.php?section=politica&article=008n2pol>

Rojas, Clara Eugenia. “The ‘V-Day’ March in Mexico: Appropriation and Misuse of Local Women’s Activism.” *NWSA Journal.* 17.2 (Summer 2005): 217-227. Print.

---. “(Re)inventando una praxis política desde un imaginario feminista.” *Bordeando la violencia contra las mujeres en la frontera norte de México.* Coord. Julia Monárrez Fragoso y María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. Tijuana, Baja California: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2007. 83-114. Print.

Romero, Rolando J. “Border of Fear, Border of Desire.” *Borderlines: Studies in American Culture.* 1.1 (1993): 36-70. Print.

---. “Foundational Motherhood: Malinche/Guadalupe in Contemporary Mexican and Chicana/Chicano Culture.” *Feminism, nation and myth: La Malinche.* Eds. Rolando

Romero and Amanda Nolacea Harris. Houston, Tex.: Arte Público Press, 2005. 28-43. Print.

Rozemayer, Karl. "'Under the Same Moon': A Lunar Eclipse for a Young Director." *Premiere.com* Web. August 30th, 2008. <http://www.premiere.com/features/4465/under-the-same-moon-a-lunar-eclipse-for-a-young-director-page2.html>

Rudiño, Lourdes Edith. "Fomento rural y económico en Latinoamérica, piden migrantes desde EU." *La Jornada del Campo.* February 1st, 2008. Web. April 26, 2010. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/02/12/fomento.html>

Ruiz, Vicki L. and Tiano, Susan, eds. *Women on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Responses to Change.* Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987. Print.

Sanmiguel, Rosario. *Callejón Sucre y otros relatos.* 1st edition. Colección Paso del Norte. Tijuana, B.C., México: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1994. Print.

Santitos. Dir. Alejandro Springall. Perf. Dolores Heredia and Damián Bichir. C.O.R.E Digital Pictures, 1999. DVD.

Schmidt Camacho, Alicia. "Body Counts on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Feminicidio, Reification, and the Theft of Mexicana Subjectivity." *Chicana/Latina Studies.* 4:1 (Fall 2004): 22-60. Print.

---. "Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women's Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico." *New Centenal Review.* 5.1 (Spring, 2005): 255-292. Print.

Señorita Extraviada. Dir. Lourdes Portillo. Women Make Movies, 2001. DVD.

Slaughter, Stephany. "Embodied (in)justice: A Review of Maria Muro's and Marta Aura's *Mujer on the Border.*" *E-misférica*. June 2006. Web. 23 June 2009. < http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/3.1/eng/en31_pg_slaughter.ht

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1988. 217-317. Print.

Stevens. Evelyn P. "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo." *Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition: Women in Latin American History.* Ed. Gertrude M. Yeager. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994. 3-17. Print.

Storey, John. *Cultural consumption and everyday life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

Swain, Regina. *La Señorita Superman y otras danzas*. Chimalistac, D.F., México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993. Print.

Tabuenca Córdoba, María Socorro. "*Baile de fantasmas* en Ciudad Juárez al final/principio del milenio." *Más allá de la ciudad letrada: Crónicas y espacios urbanos.* Eds. Boris Muñoz y Silvia Spitta. Pittsburg, PA: Universidad de Pittsburg, 2003. 411-438. Print.

---. "Sketches of Identities from the Mexico-US Border (or the other Way Around)." *Comparative American Studies.* 3.4 (2005): 495-513. Print.

---. "Representations of femicide in border cinema." *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response.* Eds. Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. 81-101. Print.

Tarrés, María Luisa. "Discurso y acción política feminista (1970-2000)." Coord. Marta Lamas. *Miradas feministas sobre las mexicanas del siglo XX*. México, D.F.: FCE, CONACULTA, 2007. 113-148. Print.

Tiano, Susan. "The Changing Gender Composition of the Maquiladora Workforce along the U.S.-Mexico Border." *Women and Change at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Mobility, Labor, and Activism*. Eds. Doreen J. Mattingly and Ellen R. Hansen. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006. 73-90. Print.

Tovar, Luis. "Lo que pudo haber sido y no fue." *Cinexcusas.* April 13th, 2008. Web. October 2nd, 2008. http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/04/13/sem-tovar.html

"Tragedy." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. Columbia University Press. Web. 21 July 2009. <Reference.com> <http://www.reference.com/browse/tragedy>.

Under the Same Moon/La misma luna. Dir. Patricia Riggen, Fox Searchlight, 2007. DVD.

"*Under the Same Moon* (2008) International Box Office Results." *Box Office Mojo*. Web. March 26, 2009. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=underthesamemoon.htm>

Urrea, Luis Alberto. *Across the wire: life and hard times on the Mexican border*. New York: Anchor Books, 1993. Print.

---. *By the lake of sleeping children: The secret life of the Mexican border.* New York: Anchor Books, 1996. Print.

Valenzuela Arce, José Manuel. *Nuestros piensos: Culturas populares en la frontera México-Estados Unidos*. México, D.F.: CONACULTA, 1998. Print.

---. *Paso del Nortec: This is Tijuana.* México: Trilce Ediciones, 2004. Print.

---. *Tecateando el recuerdo: Recuentos y recreaciones fronterizas.* Tijuana: CONACULTA, 2007. Print.

Vaquera, Santiago. "Tijuana Postcards: Geografías imaginarias." *Ventana Abierta: Revista Latina de Literatura, Arte y Cultura.* 1.3 (Fall 1997): 22-31. Print.

Vaughan, Mary Kay. "Introducción." *Con voz propia: Mujeres rurales en los noventa*. Coords. Marroni, María da Gloria y María Eugenia D'Aubeterre Buznego. Puebla, Pue., México: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 2002. 9-14. Print.

Vila, Pablo. *Ethnography at the Border*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Print.

---. *Border Identifications: Narratives of Religion, Gender, and Class on the U.S.-Mexico border.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. Print.

Villalpando, Rubén. "Van 75 *feminicidios* en Juárez este año." September 29th, 2008. *La Jornada.* Web. November 13th, 2008. http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/09/29/index.php?section=sociedad&article=047n1soc

--- y Fabiola Martínez. "Honda preocupación de AI por el asedio a la familia Reyes Salazar." February 19, 2011. *La Jornada.* Web. July 6, 2011. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/02/19/politica/011n2pol>

Villoro, Juan. "Nothing to Declare: Welcome to Tijuana." Eds. Luis Humberto Crosthwaite et al. *Puro Border: Dispatches, Snapshots & Graffiti from La Frontera.* El Paso, Tex: Cinco Puntos Press, 2003. 197-205. Print.

Villoro, Luis. "Sobre la identidad de los pueblos." *Reflexiones sobre la identidad de los pueblos*. Coord. Ruiz, Ramón Eduardo and Olivia Teresa Ruiz. Tijuana, B.C., México: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1996. 23-35. Print.

Weissberg, Jay. "MAQUILOPOLIS." Rev. of: *Maquilápolis (City of Factories)*. *Variety* 3 (Apr. 2006): 72. Arts Module. ProQuest. Michigan State University library system. Web.10 Dec. 2008. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/>

Winn, Peter. "Recent Documentary Films on Latin American Workers." Rev. of: *Maquilápolis (City of Factories)*. *International Labor and Working Class History* 70.1 (2006): 159-164. ABI/INFORM Global. ProQuest. Michigan State University library system. Web. 10 Dec. 2008. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/>

Wright W, Melissa. "Paradoxes, Protests and the *Mujeres de Negro* of Northern Mexico." *Gender, Place and Culture.* 12.3 (September 2005): 277–292. Print.

---. “Public Women, Profit, and Femicide in Northern Mexico.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 105.4 (Fall 2006): 681-698. Print.

Yépez, Heriberto. “Oiga.” *Cuentos para oír y huir al otro lado*. Mexicali, B.C. México: Plaza y Valdés, 2002. Print.