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Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán

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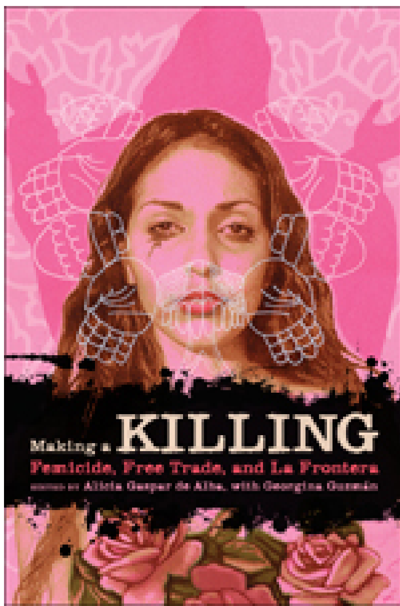

In her powerful afterword to *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera,* Jane Caputi invokes the sacrificed and dismembered Aztec Warrior Moon Goddess, Coyolxauhqui, as the symbol for the ongoing femicide—defined by Jill Radford and Diana Russel in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* as the killing of women qua women, often condoned by, if not sponsored by the state and/or by religious institutions—in the border metropolis of Juárez, Mexico. The femicide in question is the rape and murder of over five hundred women (and counting), many of whom come from the rural south of Mexico to work at twin-plant *maquiladoras* that opened along the border after the signing of the NAFTA treaty in 1993. Caputi argues that these killings should be analyzed not just within a political and socio-economic framework, but also as, "a modern enactment of the core patriarchal myth of Goddess murder" (280). That is, within a cultural and *spiritual* framework as well. These factors are the driving force behind *Making a Killing*, a collection of twelve academic and personal essays that Gaspar de Alba divides into three sections: the first concerns the social ideologies that allowed the femicide to flourish, the second analyzes the ways in which it has been countered, and the third contains personal reflections and testimonies on the crimes.

“Interventions,” the first section, examines the murders within a socio-economic and ideological context, supporting Caputi’s above claim that the pervading traditions of machismo and misogyny have allowed the crimes in Juárez to continue practically unpunished. In “Accountability for Murder in the *Maquiladoras*,” Elvia Arriola presents the murders as a manifestation of the inherent relationship between women, gender violence and free trade, attributable to an absence of regulations in free trade policy under NAFTA. She notes that American companies saw women as the ideal worker, “a hybrid of stereotypes based on sex, race, and class—she was not only more docile and passive than Mexican men, but submissive, easily trainable […]” (31). Several authors in this section address the tendency to blame the victim. As Gaspar de Alba demonstrates in “Poor Brown Female: The Miller’s Compensation for ‘Free’ Trade,” this logic is manifested in prevention campaigns that focus on the importance of "respectability" and "moral" behavior, warning "loose women" of the risks of public spaces, which are (implicitly) reserved for men.

All the authors in this first section address the particularity of the border zone, a complex and contested transitional geographical space both uniting and separating Mexico and the United States. According to Steven Volk and Marian Schlotterbeck in “Gender, Order, and Femicide,” the border—a territory of power and violence—has become a manifestation of the clash between late-capitalist, globalized production and traditional conceptions of gender identities. Each article in this section contains a different focus, but they are ultimately in agreement that the social anxiety based on patriarchal binaries of male dominance and female submission and the easy movement of North American corporations and the Mexican business and political elite across the border have resulted in a fatal indifference to human rights—a femicide which, without the activism discussed in the following section, would have undergone practically no investigation.

The second section, “Ni Una Más!” contains the most polemic entries in the collection. The essays here analyze—and disagree about—the involvement of nongovernmental organizations and emergence of grassroots forms of activism to counter the femicide. Three of the four critics, with the exception of Julia Monárrez-Fragoso, invoke the V-Day march, a protest against the femicides held on 14 February 2003, as a tragic example of these dynamics at work. The march, organized by activist Esther Chávez Cano of the international organization Casa Amiga, was boycotted by the local women’s activist organization Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa. The events revealed the gaping political and ideological divide among the activists (led by Chávez Cano) who protested against the “blame-the-victim” strategy of the Mexican government, and the local “mother-activists,” who, playing on the concept of the mother as inherently *apolitical*, demanded the return of their children. Monárrez-Fragoso and Clara Rojas insist that this first group of “morality” activists, many of its members belonging to the elite social classes, were in reality defending their own political and economic hegemonic interests and were incapable of understanding the victims’ families’ pain. While acknowledging this view, Melissa Wright warns

of the pitfalls of some of the NGOs who exploit the “mother-activist” strategy. In reality, these mothers, “have liberty with the details but not with the general outline of their story,” which must center on their motherhood (231). Wright argues that these efforts remain trapped within and divided by a capitalist and patriarchal rhetoric of “motherhood,” as has been the case in other campaigns against violence in other Latin American countries; here she uses the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina as an analogous example. The mother-activists fall into a capitalist trap in which the repetition of their testimony becomes a “productive act” or “commodity-sign,” to use Butler and Baudrillard, in order to “compete in the international market for human rights causes” (232). As a result, “mother-activism” has emerged as an “object,” alienated from the very women who made it, that is caught up in a capitalist discourse which, if recognized as the only legitimate form of activism, risks silencing other forms of women’s activism.

The short final section of *Making a Killing*, “Testimonios,” is a collection of personal reflections by forensic psychologist Candice Skrapec, artist Rigo Maldonado, and two “mother-activists” Eva Arce and Paula Flores. The moving and powerful testimonies of the mothers reveal the huge obstacles the victims’ families face: the tactics of the authorities to buy their silence, remove them from public spaces, and create rivalries among mothers who have received money and those who have not. At the same time, after reading the previous section on women’s activist groups, it is difficult to extricate these testimonies from the capitalist and patriarchal rhetoric of motherhood presented by Melissa Wright. The editor’s choice to insert these testimonies last, therefore, places them in an ambiguous light, and the reader is left with the feeling that there is no right answer to the controversial debate of the second section.

Overall, the wide range of disciplinary and critical perspectives—Chicana/o, border and gender studies, geography, forensic psychology, testimony, and personal reflection—yields an extremely rich and complex collection. Gaspar de Alba introduces the book as an intervention in the Freirian sense of *concientización*, which is the intrinsic connectedness between the personal experience and the socio-political structure as fundamental to understanding oppressed people and the power structures to which they are subjugated. This important collection of scholarly and personal reflections not only raises awareness, but also provides a variety of critical paths into this “gynocide” which has too often been shrouded in mystery.

Nathalie Bragadir is completing her PhD in the Spanish Department at New York University. Her dissertation, “Contested Topographies,” concerns the border between colonial Saint Domingue and Santo Domingo in the 18th century leading up to the Haitian Revolution, specifically looking at how, through a topographical and linguistic register, the imaginary of the border has created subjectivities of nationality, race, class, and gender.

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