Killing as Performance: Violence and the Shaping of Community

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Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs. For even the immediate future is far from mankind.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies

1

When I hear this Mexican city's name, a shudder goes across my back. Ciudad Juárez. Border town. City of *maquila*.¹ Paradise of impunity. A *polis* of death. It has been more than ten years since the first female body was found there. The macabre events that followed were regarded at first as curious exceptions to the normal routine of the city. Years later, we can only conclude that that first body marked the very beginning of the situation in which we are now, where these exceptions are sadly becoming the rule. Since 1993, the lives of 400 young women, perhaps more, have been lost. The victims are usually poor *mestizo* women between 14 and 30 years old, pretty, thin. They have long, dark hair. Most of them are students, housewives, *maquila* or service industry workers; most of them are economically disadvantaged.²

It has been argued that the way the crimes are carried out in Ciudad Juárez have clear-cut, almost 'bureaucratic', characteristics. It always begins with the disappearance of a young woman, followed by a period of uncertainty. Then, in some cases, a tortured, mutilated, strangled corpse is found somewhere around the margins of the city, thrown into the desert. In other cases, nothing is found. Civil society groups become active, international attention is summoned.
Scapegoats are chosen by local authorities and with this action, government officials say, the crime is 'resolved'. Attempts to understand the horror are made, explanations are sought. Corpses keep emerging, young women continue to go missing.³

A lot has been written about the murders of Ciudad Juárez. However, I believe that the search for a 'cause' or a 'motive' behind them has proved largely futile. How are we to understand the un-understandable? The negative effects of indiscriminate economic globalization, male resentment towards women's new role and economic power, radical socioeconomic inequality, and the dominion of drug cartels have been chosen as possible culprits. Probably they all play a causal part. Nevertheless, what remains missing in a great part of the analyses carried out so far is an investigation into what these murders signify. The symbolic aspect of these killings – the message they convey, the political shaping and reshaping they initiate – remains to be elucidated. In this essay, I hope to offer a starting point to such an exploration.

From my perspective, the events of Ciudad Juárez represent the enactment of a sort of performativity of the political community that is usually hidden or covered over, erased from public view. Let me explain what I mean by this. A 'performative' is usually defined as a type of utterance that through its very enunciation accomplishes or generates a particular effect (Parker and Sedgwick 1995: 3). In How to Do Things with Words, J. L. Austin argues that in order to be effective, performatives need a 'proper context', a context that allows for the appropriate interpretation of the utterance and through which the message can be rightly conveyed. The closure of such a strict context, Andrew Parker and Eve K.
Sedgwick argue, "has opened, under pressure of recent theory, onto a populous and contested scene in which the role of silent or implied witnesses [...] or the quality and structuration of the bonds that unite auditors or link them to speakers, bears as much explanatory weight as do the particular speech acts of supposed individual agents" (Parker and Sedgwick 1995: 7).

On this line, the classical definition of the performative – that is, when and how saying actually counts as doing, and doing as saying – can be opened up to aid our understanding of the political. Judith Butler’s work, for example, offers a critique of the sovereign illusion implied in the traditional understanding of the performative, in which someone, a will-producing agent, is taken to be the initiator or original source of the action/utterance, the one that gives the performative its force. By contrast, Butler argues that every performative action echoes prior actions, and that the authority of the performative is precisely augmented by the repetition and citation of prior authoritative sets of social practices. In her words, "a performative ‘works’ to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized" (Butler 1995: 205). By downplaying the role of the agent and highlighting the role of citation, Butler renders the mechanism of the performative derivative and imitative; it is precisely the constant repetition of the (in reality) contingently founded act that constitutes and authorizes a set of practices and grants them with social and political meaning (Butler 1990: 145).

As has been argued for the question of gender identity (see Butler 1990, 1993), I contend that political communities are also constituted and acted out by and through performative practices. These practices at once delineate the contours of community – turn a certain collectivity into a community – and also engage in a
constant shaping and reshaping of its own borders by negotiating inclusions and legitimating exclusions. My claim is that by analyzing the case of Ciudad Juárez from a standpoint informed by both political philosophy and performance theory, we become aware of a very particular, but perhaps not entirely exceptional, way of creating community and granting identity.

A key characteristic of the performative, Butler argues, is its 'citationality', that is, "the operation of that metalepsis by which the subject who 'cites' the performative is temporarily produced as the belated and fictive origin of the performative itself" (Butler 1995: 203). Citationality gives the illusion of a clear 'source' of agency, of a subject as the sole originator of the utterance. By a similar mechanism, the notion of a substantial and unified political community can only arise after the community has been already instituted, after its practices and beliefs have been sufficiently cited, after the inclusions and exclusions that shape it have been decided. It is in and through the repetition of the practices that make a community out of us that its arbitrary foundations are covered over and reference to an Absolute – a source of sovereignty, for example – is initiated. In a way similar to citationality, the function of this Absolute is to give stability to a human-made creation by signaling to an outside referent that can grant a stable meaning to the political community, a meaning that seeks to answer the question of the 'why' of collective human existence. By granting meaning, the Absolute also serves to legitimate and naturalize certain practices of dominion and subjection.

If we accept the importance of the deployment of citationality, it follows that the performative practices that aid in the construction of communitarian identity are not to be considered a single, originating act of creation, but instead must be
regarded as a constant doing and redoing that does not have a static or permanent effect, but instead functions like a repetition with a difference (Roach 1995: 46) – or, we could say, as a repetition within a difference.\textsuperscript{4}

On this line, it is important to point out that, while the citationality of the performative is what grants it its authoritativeness and relative stability, this does not mean that it fully determines its future effects. In our case, the community could appropriate the norms conveyed by the citationality to subvert their meaning and communicate a message that would counter the original motives. As Butler argues, "the appropriation of such norms to oppose their historically sedimented effect constitutes the insurrectionary moment of [its] history, the moment that founds a future through a break with the past" (Butler 1997: 159).

With this in the background, let's examine our case a bit closer. The liberalization of the Mexican economy and the arrival of the maquiladoras to Juárez during the 70's and 80's attracted thousands of women and men from all over the country with the promise of work and the lure of economic freedom. Juárez, by virtue of its strategic location just across from El Paso, Texas, had always functioned as a transit city offering temporal shelter to people trying to immigrate to the United States. With this constant flux of people, the identity and the character of the community were altered: the force of the ever-growing margins of Juárez started to dominate its urban center. Soon, the precariousness of the margins reached deep inside the city. Now, 40 percent of its inhabitants live in conditions of extreme poverty (Gonzalez Rodríguez 2002: 29).

Death, poverty, drug and human trafficking. When confronting Juárez we seem truly to stand before a 'death zone' (Balibar 2002) in which the politics of
civility and democratic conflict have been erased and the public space has become a realm of violent performance – a place in which public acts take the form of rape, torture, and murder. It is a fact that the identity of this community of death is being reshaped, and its borders reworked, by femicide.

I propose to understand these killings themselves as a performance, a political performance, and to regard the killers as political actors *par excellence*. By the precise and highly ritualized repetition of these femicides – the sequence of abduction, torture, rape, strangling, disposal of the body in a public place is to be found in almost every account of the crimes – the community is constantly reshaping its borders. In consequence, inclusions and exclusions are being clearly and explicitly delineated, and a political message is sent. Each killing seems to 'cite' the other, previous one, and in itself constitutes a mere rendering of the next. In their performance, the pseudo-sovereigns of the community, without being truly aware of it, convey something which they do not dare to publicly utter: the responsibility of actually saying it is something they cannot handle. The horrific performance screams: you women are nothing! See, no one cares about you! You are not really a part of our society; at most you belong to its fringes; you live in a threshold area in which everything is possible (and as Hannah Arendt explained, the belief that 'everything is possible' led humanity to the concentration camps). You may be killed, but your death is not punishable. We deem your life, a life that inhabits the actual and symbolic margins of the community, a *sacred life*…

2

The twilight zone between legality and illegality inaugurated by the killing of a woman in 1993 has been steadily spreading. Perhaps one day it will reach the
nation. Perhaps it already did. Over the last decade, the young, working-class women of Juárez have been turned into a perfect contemporary incarnation of what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998: 8, 73): a life that may be killed but not sacrificed, a vulnerable life exposed to a murder that is followed by an empty reaction. A no-reaction, no punishment.

Agamben provocatively writes that every society, no matter how 'modern' – and, we could add, how 'democratic' – decides at some point who its sacred men will be (Agamben 1998: 139). By altering the Schmittian definition of the sovereign as he who decides on the state of exception, Agamben argues that in modern politics the sovereign is instead he who decides on the value or non-value of life as such, on what is to count as a life worthy of being lived. In contemporary politics, continues Agamben, "life – which, with the declarations of rights, had as such been invested with the principle of sovereignty – now becomes the place of a sovereign decision" (Agamben 1998: 142). Agamben contends that the classical Greek distinction between the meaning of *zoe* (bare life, biological life) and *bios* (a way of life proper to an individual or a group) has collapsed, and that this breakdown constitutes the definitive mark of political modernity. The irruption of bare life into the political realm uncovers for him the hidden basis of the Western notion of the political: the fact that we must exclude our bodies in order to have a sociopolitical life and that this strange and impossible exclusion is what constitutes civil life as such. The political defined as a ban, as the ban of bare life and the authorization of a qualified life. However, Agamben explains that bare life is included in the political insofar as it is the condition of possibility of something like a political existence. Bare life marks the border between belonging and not belonging; the originary
political move – the move that *institutes* politics – is that by which the 'sovereign' declares who are to be the righteous dwellers of the city, which qualified lives are to have value, and which lives are to be disposed of.

The life of *homo sacer* is not worthy of being lived; that is, it is not politically relevant. It is important to note that *homo sacer* does not play the role of the 'other' to the community, of a being that in fact belongs somewhere else. To the contrary, *homo sacer* stands at the very borders of what counts as a political community as if, by its very absence, it protected it from dissolution. In Agamben's words, "there is politics because man is the living being who, in language, *separates and opposes* himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, *maintains himself in relation to that bare life* in an inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998: 8, emphasis mine).

The ancient separation of *zoe* from *bios*, of biological human life from political life, guaranteed each of these notions a clear space of action and existence. It was only with the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) that bare life began to be regarded as the basis of national sovereignty and thus was thrown into the political stage. In Agamben's account, the coming into being of the political form of the nation-state closely related the *fact* of birth to the *right* of political belonging. He continues, echoing Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "the fiction implicit here is that birth immediately becomes nation, such that there can be no distinction between the two moments. Rights, that is, are attributed to man only in the degree to which he is the immediately vanishing presupposition (indeed, he must never appear simply as man) of the citizen" (Agamben 1995: 118). The bare life of Man is not as worthy as
the qualified life of the Citizen. Once citizens appear only in their bare humanity – as in the case of refugees and of the prisoners in Guantánamo and other 'detention camps' – without the backing of a nation-state, their vulnerability is very much increased, and their 'right to have rights' decreased (Arendt 1979).

As the dwellers of totalitarian camps, women in Juárez have now entered into direct contact with death even if they are not yet dead. They have been granted a 'capacity to be killed' (Agamben 1998: 100-114) just because of who they are, to which gender and class they belong, how they look, and the low regard with which the majority of the community esteem their lives. The unending repetition of the killings, the way they seem to cite each other, has rendered the female body a border that stands in between those who are authorized into the political community and those who are excluded, a vulnerable threshold that might be potentially incarnated by any (poor, non-privileged) young woman. Agamben says, "homo sacer is the one with respect to whom all men act like sovereigns" (Agamben 1998: 84). In this sense, the killing of one is, or at least could be, interchangeable with the killing of another.

Beyond the femicides, the performative process by which poor, mestizo Juárez women have come to be a community of replaceable *homo sacer* – in other words, the violent strategy by which women's citizenship is being steadily weakened and deconstructed – is also clearly illustrated and strengthened by the changing narratives of Juárez's political economy. The economic elites of the city intend to transform Juárez, once regarded as a paradise of low-tech, unskilled, cheap female labor, into a heaven of a new high-tech type of *maquila*, one in which trained, middle class, male workers will prevail (see Wright 2001, 2004). An
exclusionary strategy of community-building has thus been at work in a twofold manner: it has been enacted, on the one hand, by the violent physical disappearance of poor women and, on the other, by the growing masculinization of the *maquila* labor force. In this way, the political and economic exclusionary strategies actually feed each other.

As Melissa Wright has rightly argued, women, once praised as the champions of Juárez's economic prosperity and as the main players of the *maquila* industry, have now turned into the foundation – a foundation that needs to be left behind – of a different economic future (Wright, 2001: 102). The signs of economic progress are now related to women's absence. If, by being regarded *homo sacer*, the value (or non-value) of the life of the Juárez woman had already been decided by the sovereigns of the city, then, by a similar strategy, "[…] we find progress in the places where she once worked, in the spaces she once occupied, in the city she once inhabited" (Wright, 2004: 371). And if economically disadvantaged women represent the limit that separates value from non-value, then we can say that the women who keep on coming to Juárez symbolize for the killers and the *maquila* industry a perpetual supply of a value-defining element, a line that draws and makes possible the existence of a certain community by means of the exclusion of unworthy lives. To sum up, the idea is that in Juárez women are "always on the way out of a job only to be replaced by someone else just like her" (Wright, 2002: 95, emphasis mine).

Going back to the killings, we can see now that a crucial characteristic proper to *homo sacer*, then, is its replaceability, its capacity to be easily incarnated by another, by any other, once the killing has been consummated. This is why it is
of utmost importance to regard the exclusions and killings developing in Juárez as political acts enacted in a public space. In its acts and protests, civil society has strived to portray and represent the individuality of those considered by many disposable and interchangeable. Indeed, in this way the exclusionary shaping of the community might be subverted. It is the very acknowledgement of the fragility of political inclusion – of the fact that there is no a priori limit that could prevent our turning into homo sacer – that perhaps moves us to imagine a community that which fully recognizes the value of difference and diversity: one that accounts for every life and mourns every death.

3

In her recent work on life, violence, and mourning, Butler has shown the link between public grief and the value of life. Butler throws a poignant question: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And [...] what makes for a grievable life?" (Butler 2004: 19) Butler presents here a connection between vulnerability, political recognition, and the performative element of community by introducing a factor which, she says, socially constitutes each one of us, at least in part: violence and the experience of loss. Butler argues that we, as a community, perform the recognition of the life of the other precisely by acknowledging its and our own vulnerability. Recognizing the vulnerability of the other makes him or her real. The loss of those whose lives were not recognized as valuable human lives "cannot be mourned because they are always already lost, or rather, never 'were', and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness [...] The derealization of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral" (Butler 2004: 33-34, emphasis mine).
Could it be the case that the women of Juárez are not being truly recognized as losses by the community? Are they being derealized and, with this, expelled from the community of those we may publicly grieve? Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Señorita Extraviada* (Missing Young Woman, 2001) offers a key to react to these questions. At some point in her film – which portrays the difficult struggle for justice in which civil society groups and the family of the victims are engaged – Portillo talks to some girls in the street about their feelings, about life in Juárez. Do they feel safe? Yes, they answer smiling. Are you afraid? No. Did you know that a girl recently disappeared right here? Silence. As Rita González pointed out, "Portillo has consistently paid attention to an entire economy of gestures and silences." To this point, she continues, "her camera lingers on the mutable expression of a young girl who realizes that a disappearance has recently taken place on the corner in which she stands. The ebullient smile on the girl's face turns slowly to extreme concern and fear" (González 1993: 237). Just a moment later, Portillo tells us that the sister of one of those girls disappeared a few weeks after this interview.

These girls' silence passes on a message they cannot verbally express. Resisting the self-recognition of their vulnerability, they refuse to accept the death of the other girls as true losses, perhaps as an attempt to disassociate themselves from the possibility of being subjected to the same violence. And when Portillo shows how the local authorities consistently prevent any decent and intelligent criminal investigation and do not acknowledge properly the severity of the case, we know that the girls' odds of suffering such fates are actually high.
We come here at the intersection of several points that have preoccupied me in this essay. It is clear that the performative process by which the symbolic margins of Juárez are drawn and re-drawn is deeply sexualized. If, as I contend, rape and killing constitute a political performance, then it is left to explore the constitutive relation that violence – in this case, sexual violence – plays in the creation of the political field. Such violence may be potential or actual, but I believe that it always discloses itself in the absences that constitute the very notion of political belonging.

The fact that women in Juárez have been turned into *homo sacer* reveals a radical misrecognition of the value of their lives. The way by which Juárez, as a community, does not acknowledge that through every killing and every disappearance its borders are being demarcated anew, becoming each time more and more exclusionary, shows clearly that these women were not even regarded as once fully alive. They had been already marked as *homo sacer*; acts of violence against them were therefore symbolically authorized. Following Butler's insight once more, "violence against those who are not already quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death leaves a mark that is no mark" (Butler 2004: 36). The consequence is a loss that is not regarded as such. A murder that conveys a powerful message that many pretend not to hear.

But now, in order to distill some political meaning out of this, let's look for a geography of vulnerability. Butler argues, "lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected,
and the abrogation to their claim to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'" (Butler 2004: 32).

This global unequal distribution of vulnerability is replicated within the community; this is perfectly illustrated by Juárez. The women at risk live literally at the margins, in the miserable neighborhoods, in the areas of the city that lack basic infrastructure. In the parts of the city that represent the very border between inside and outside, between relative security and probable death. These women inhabit a place that is "the non-democratic condition for democracy itself" (Balibar 2002: xi), or the unsafe condition for safety itself. What are the implications? What is the message these events convey and what can be learned from them?

First of all, the events uncover the social and political invisibility of a group of people. It is completely obvious by now that neither the local nor the federal government really sees, or wants to see, what is happening. It is as if both the physical presence of the bodies and the absence of the disappeared have escaped their radar. By now we may better understand why. As I tried to show in the second section of the essay these women are/were nothing more than homo sacer, and as such their lives never really counted.

Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo presents a chilling episode that clearly captures the peculiar invisibility of homo sacer. Delbo recounts a day when, during an early morning roll call at Auschwitz, a woman, a 'walking skeleton', she says, breaks line and walks towards a ditch. Delbo writes that the woman seemed so determined that no one tried to persuade her to stay in her place. She fell in the ditch. Everybody realized it. Everybody looked, but no one moved. Delbo imagines
what went through the woman's head: "Why are all these women looking at me like this? Why are they there, lined up in close ranks, standing immobile? They look at me and yet they do not seem to see me. They cannot possibly see me, or they wouldn't stand there gaping. They'd help me climb up. Why don't you help me, you standing so close? Help me, pull me up. Lean in my direction. Stretch out your hand. Oh, they don't make a move" (Delbo 1995: 24-25).

Reading these words, it seems that, paradoxically, the most extreme and unjust social and political invisibility does not necessarily imply a total lack of awareness to the existence of a person. Delbo shows that these women knew that their fellow inmate fell into a ditch and that she was struggling to get out. They looked at her, but they did not see her. They looked at her physical, bodily presence but did not acknowledge her extreme vulnerability and the value of what remained of her life. Precisely by ignoring her pleading, Delbo makes the invisibility of this woman fully visible to us.

Delbo’s account is helpful for a political analysis of the events that concern us. We all know, we all look, but few are courageous enough to see, to speak out, to act. Those in and outside the community that have the institutional capacity and economic resources needed to stop the femicide resist performing a recognition of the vulnerability of this group of women, and thus prevent any possibility of ending the cruelly exclusionary way in which Juarez’s communal identity has been shaped over these years. In this way, even if they do not take a direct part in the killings, they bear a great part of the responsibility. Every time someone suggests that these women had it coming – the old game of blaming the victim – that person is
making community with the killers (Butler 2004: 206). His/her utterance cites and legitimates the violent events in which the actual murderers took part.

I consider that one way of moving towards a true recognition and true visibility of the humanity of these women is for the community to avow and accept that, as Butler argues, the exposure to violence and our (willing or unwilling) complicity in it, the experiences of loss that we all go through, and the process of mourning we engage in to resolve our loss, constitute perhaps the only universal human experience. Butler says, "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing such attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (Butler 2004, 20).

The second message these events carry is the constitutive role that the border between inclusion and exclusion plays in constructing a sense of community. It is worth quoting Agamben at length here: "every interpretation of the political meaning of the term 'people' must begin with the singular fact that in modern European languages, 'people' also always indicate the poor, the disinhherited, the excluded. One term thus names both the constitutive political subject and the class that is, de facto if not de jure, excluded from politics" (Agamben 1998: 176).

The notion of 'People' as a way of referring to the politically relevant inhabitants of a community is formally codified in various Declarations and Constitutions: we know that, in democracies, the sovereign is the People, decisions are to be made according to what they want and need. In contrast, the political entitlements of the 'people' are not legally recognized; at most, they take the form
of an empty promise. 'I will speak on your behalf, on behalf of the people', politicians love to say… Those belonging to the People are grievable because they actively shaped the community, were truly a part of it. And when they pass, they represent a true loss. This is not the case with the people. They are considered an excess that must be erased. Perhaps this is why, in fact, the burden of geographical vulnerability always rests upon them. Is it possible and desirable to merge the People and the people? Or is this a totalitarian fantasy? Here I can only suggest that the democracy to come would do better to rid itself of any notion of an all-inclusive subject. 'Universal' subjects have only worked to exclude, even exterminate, those who do not fit into their ideal model.

How does the understanding of shaping the community as performance aid the democratic project? As Butler implies, critical reactions to the performative must be subversive. In the Juárez case, the situation is already positioned beyond the legal sphere; in fact, introducing fully the problem in the sphere of legality is a very difficult (but still necessary) task. While grappling with the legal battle, civil society must also act in a way that transcends the legal. The killers and the people who have worked to prevent a solution to the femicides have acted in a performative, exhibitionist way: through their acts and utterances they have given the community an exclusive shape, one which seeks to turn poor mestizo women invisible. We need to find a similar, crude way to expose, and with this acknowledge, margins and borders – a way to mourn those on the margins and democratize the life of those on the borders – in order to counteract the exclusionary strategy with one which strives to build a democratic sense of community. We need truly, courageously, and collectively to perform the
recognition of our human vulnerability and that of the other and, from it, begin to empower ourselves politically. The reality of Juárez women must then be made fully visible; the absent must reappear – if only symbolically – if Ciudad Juárez wants to erase (or at least render less obvious) the deep scars these events have left as inheritance to the community.¹⁰

¹ Maquiladoras are assemblage factories, financed by foreign capital, that produce exportable goods.

² The Mexican government has tried since the beginning to lessen the number of deaths. The latest official figure I have is 323 women (a declaration to the media made by Mexican President Vicente Fox, June 1, 2005). Non-governmental organizations and human rights groups give a higher figure, around 400 or even more. There are also hundreds of women reported as missing. Research on the events of Ciudad Juarez is based primarily on the book Huesos en el desierto (González Rodríguez 2004), on the documentary film Señorita Extraviada (Portillo 2001), and on Julia Monárrez-Fragoso's work on the subject (Monárrez-Fragoso 2003). For more information on Juárez visit the website of the organization Nuestras hijas de regreso a casa: www.mujeresdejuarez.org

³ This description of the precision of the femicides as almost 'bureaucratic' derives from Rita Laura Segato (Segato 2004).

⁴ I refer to a 'repetition within a difference' because I want to clarify the idea that to 'cite' is not merely to 'replicate'. In citing, a difference is always introduced, the 'original' is already altered. In citing again something that was in itself a rendering of a prior situation, it is clear to see that we are altering something that was already
altered, but seemed to be unchanged. An example of the practice and the effects of citationality is given by Joan Scott's book *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Scott 1997). In her book, Scott analyses the strategies that 17th- to 20th-century French feminists utilized in order to struggle for the extension of the purportedly universal 'rights of man and the citizen' to women. Although speaking from a position of difference (from the illegitimate standpoint of 'women', which was excluded from the public sphere), these feminists aimed at uncovering the false universality of rights precisely by citing them on behalf of women and by rhetorically appropriating a set of rights that did not belong to them.

5 In her work, Melissa W. Wright has interestingly shown that the corporate elites of the city have always regarded female labor as 'temporary'. These elites regard the high turnover present in the *maquilas* as a reflection of the low value women attach to being loyal to their employers and of the cultural construction of Mexican femininity that demands women to be primary care-takers of the family (Wright 2001).

6 Cultural workers interested in the Juárez case have interestingly depicted the tension between individuality and the idea of 'interchangeability'. For example, in Lorena Wolffer's performance piece, *Mientras dormíamos* (While We Were Sleeping, 2003) the artist drew on her body the blows, cuts, and shots that 50 of the victims had suffered. Her performance highlights the essence of these murders: in Wolffer's body the wounds coexist, mime each other's shape, overlap. All of the violence inflicted on the body of 50 women is captured in one body – all this screams interchangeability. Nevertheless, by highlighting the fact that these
wounds were inflicted to 50 different, individual women, Wolffer at once countered the idea of their replaceability.

7 See also Portillo’s article on the filming of the documentary (Portillo 2003).

8 For example, former Chihuahua attorney general Arturo González Rascón said: "Unfortunately, there are women who because of the circumstances of their lives, the places they go about their activities, are at risk; because it would be very difficult for anyone going out into the street when it is raining, well, it would be very difficult for them not to get wet." And the president of the Juárez’s Association of Maquilas commented, "It is a very small number [of deaths], and yet we had people from the entire world interviewing us" (both quoted in Monárrez-Fragoso 2003: 160,162). Recently, Mexican president Vicente Fox referred to the advocacy of families and civil society groups in Juárez as just a 'recycling' of already solved cases. See El Universal news, May 31, 2005.

9 See, for example, the website of the Ciudad Juárez es mejor ('Ciudad Juárez is Better') campaign (www.juarezesmejor.com.mx), which indeed tries to conceal the city’s violent reality with an aura of communal harmony.

10 It is important to point out that The New York Times recently reported that Juárez is by no means the only town where events of this kind are taking place. Rather, in this city the victims' relatives and civil society groups have been more successful at publicizing and denouncing what goes on. See "In Mexico’s Murders, Fury is Aimed at Officials," The New York Times, September 26, 2005.
References


Online: [www.mujeresdejuarez.org/serie362.htm](http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org/serie362.htm)


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