

Lustful Killings in Ciudad Juárez: A Look at “Femicide,” Machismo, and Roberto Bolaño’s “Precious”

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“The sky, at sunset, looked like a carnivorous flower”
– Roberto Bolaño, *2666*.

Gendered socialization leads to gendered violence. Parents provide children with their first lessons about gender, and the home becomes a child’s first impression of power differences between the sexes. This raises the question of how much a child’s home life influences their gender-specific stereotypes and expectations. When looking at violence against women, gender socialization cannot be ignored. In the mind of a perpetrator is a deeply embedded attitude towards gender. This attitude begins developing in the home and is gradually influenced by other socializing entities like education, the media, and government.

Violence against women has only been recognized as a serious social issue since the latter part of the twentieth century. Humiliation, hatred, and denial rendered the subject into a long and nearly unbroken silence. National, random-sample surveys show that one-quarter of American women are violently victimized at some point during their lives (Renzetti and Bergen). These types of gender motivated attacks include sexual assaults and stalking. The emergence of violence against women as a serious social issue has also illuminated the grimmer subject of “femicide,” or the misogynous killing of women. “Femicide” has emerged as a major topic of concern in Latin America, the region with the most female murders on earth (Mimi Yagoub, “Why Does Latin America Have the World’s Highest Female Murder Rates”). Roberto Bolaño’s popular novel, *2666*, also focuses on the mass killing of women in Latin American. *2666* takes place in Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican city where women

were repeatedly abducted and brutally killed the in 1990s and 2000s.

“Resolve the case before Monday. No excuses.”

On November 6, 2001 the dismembered bodies of eight, young women were found in an abandoned and overgrown cotton field. The field sits opposite the headquarters of Asociación de Maquiladoras de Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican city just one mile from El Paso, Texas. Authorities later released the names of the alleged victims who had been tortured, raped, and brutally killed. They believed the remains to be those of: Claudia Ivette González Banda, 20 years old, a maquila worker; Laura Berenice Ramos Monarrez, 17 years old, a student; Guadalupe Luna de la Rosa, 19 years old, a student; Acosta Ramírez, 19 years old, a maquila worker and student; Brenda Esmeralda Herrera Monrreal, 15 years old, a domestic servant; Verónica Martínez Hernández, 19 years old, a maquila worker and student; Bárbara Araceli Martínez Ramos, 21 years old, a maid; and Mayra Juliana Reyes Solís, 17, who had been searching for work in the area (“Intolerable Killings” 12).

Immediately following the discovery of the bodies, authorities were given an order by Chihuahua’s governing office to “Resolve the case before Monday. No excuses” (Bricker). On November 9, 2001, just three days after the bodies were found, police officers wearing Halloween masks arrested Victor Javier Garcia and Gustavo Gonzalez Meza and ripped them from their homes (Bricker). Both men drove a local bus which transported female workers and students around Juárez. While detained, they were burned on the genitals. The police threaten to kill their families. Eventually, they confessed to the murders of the eight women by signing a document they never got to read (Bricker). Evidence of their torture went uninvestigated, and their confessions were used in the prosecution against them (Amnesty International 12).

Gustavo Gonzalez Meza hired Attorney Mario Escobedo Anaya to defend him. Soon after, his lawyer began receiving threats. He intended to present photographs of his client’s torture to the court. The photos depicted severe cigarette burns on

his client's genitals. On February 5, 2002, Escobedo Anaya noticed two police cars following home from his law office. Wary from the threats he had received, Escobedo Anaya tried to escape the two vehicles, and promptly called his father for help. Mario Escobedo Sr. rushed to the scene. When he arrived his son was dead. His car was wrecked on the side of the road and the policemen had killed him with two gun shots to the head (Bricker). They claimed they acted in self-defense and that Escobedo Anaya fired at them first. The judge later ruled that the marks on Gonzalez Meza's genitals were likely self-inflicted. Both bus drivers were sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Roughly a year into his sentence, Gonzalez Meza was found dead in his cell. Authorities reported that he died of complications during a hernia surgery. According to the police, he underwent this surgery while being transferred to a different Chihuahua prison. Gonzalez's wife, however, never consented to the surgery. His defense team insisted that a forged signature was used to authorize the operation (Bricker).

On July 8, 2005, the Mexican Supreme Court exonerated Victor Javier Garcia (Bricker). His co-defendant, Gustavo Gonzalez Meza, would have been released as well. While Javier Garcia's release was certainly an example of justice, a much larger issue remains at bay-- *what about the girls?* They are forever linked as the eight mangled bodies found in the same abandoned cotton field. Yet, a much larger list of women looms over the conscious of the city. At least 497 women were brutally killed between 1993 and 2007 in Ciudad Juarez. Where is their justice?

Machismo and Femicide

Juárez is unlike a lot of Mexican cities. Here, women are constantly migrating to the area. Most want to work in factories owned by foreign companies, called maquiladoras. Others are looking to eventually cross over to the U.S. The city has received international attention for the "femicide" that has gone on there since the early 1990s. Over a woman a week was killed between 1993 and 2007. They were often stabbed repeatedly, run over by cars, or beheaded. In almost all cases, they were raped. Their bloodied and maimed bodies were thrown away

in ditches and their killers were rarely convicted, or even investigated. The violence against women is not the product of a few bad men; it is the product of a machismo culture at war with the city's socio-economic changes. This conflict reverberates in law enforcement, politics, and in the home.

Julia Monarrez Fragoso defines femicide as the misogynist killing of women by men. When looking at femicide, she argues that one "must take into account: the acts of violence, the motives and imbalance between sexes in political, social, and economic environments" (Monarrez Fragoso). "Femicide" intentionally echoes the word "genocide." Genocide itself implies a systematic approach to violence; it is the deliberate killing of a specific group of people. Considering the link between structural changes in Juárez and the mass killings, a systematic approach is likely. The violence in Juárez is a directly correlated with the influx of female workers and students. The influx not only provides more pickings for serial killers, but threatens the balance of power in a patriarchal, macho society. From this angle, the killings are an affirmation of male dominance in a society experiencing major changes in terms of female agency and gender roles.

The influx of women to Juarez, which sparked the threat to macho culture, is directly tied to the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993. This agreement allowed U.S. companies to start using maquiladoras. Large numbers of women began migrating to the Juárez to work on assembly lines, thus sparking major structural changes to the city. A marginalized female working class was soon forged. Many of these women were young and uneducated. Some were sent to live alone and send money back to their families. They ultimately became the target for femicide. 1993 was when young women start getting abducted and murdered. One could argue that the influx of women simply provided the killers with more victims to choose from, and victims who were less likely to have people looking for them; however, this new class of independent working females likely created a tension within a macho culture, which clings to the idea that women belong in the home and should be dependent on men for support. The class of in-

dependent female workers threatens this, and same macho culture then allows the perpetrators to continue violently killing women with little resistance.

The eight women found on November 6, 2002 in the abandoned cotton field were all 21 or younger. They were workers, students, or both. Ironically, their bodies were found opposite the Asociación de Maquiladoras de Ciudad Juárez. This could just be a coincidence, or it could be a symbol. The men setting out to exterminate the female working class dump their mangled bodies across the street from the factories that are employing them and attracting them to the city. Female workers at maquiladoras could view the dumping ground as a sort of twisted warning: killers have officially waged war against them. Either way, the discovery of eight mangled young women sends a message of frustration and anger directed at the female working class.

Bolaño's "Precious"

Juárez is a corrupt and dangerous place. Imposition, power, and dominance are common themes in the socio-economic makeup of the city. The mayor allegedly lives in El Paso for safety (Soli). The Juárez Cartel uses violence and pay-offs to impose its will in law enforcement and politics (Soli). Violence has become normal in the city, and the femicide is product of that. The brutal killings reflect cartel mutilations, which either points the finger at the cartel, or demonstrates how their brutality has influenced public perceptions of morality. Police officers have also made few arrests with regards to the killings. They burn and torture suspects to get confessions. They threaten their suspect's families and in some cases murder opposing lawyers. They follow and intimidate journalists brave enough to seek the truth ("The City of Lost Girls"). Authorities are either being paid off, receiving threats themselves, or taking part. Either way, they are somehow motivated to protect the real killers. Why else would law enforcement be taking such corrupt and serious measures? Why do they continually show no interest in finding justice for the marginalized female victims?

Roberto Bolaño's *2666: The Part About Fate* explores the cul-

tural workings behind the Juárez killings. He does not specifically try to pinpoint who is responsible for the crimes more so than he uses an artful collection of metaphors and abstractions to condemn the entire culture for its involvement. Though many factors contribute to the problem, the city's machismo culture is at its root. Machismo culture fosters a masculine pride and superiority that manifests itself in relationships and in socio-economic gender roles. In "The New Mestiza," Gloria Anzaldúa discusses how machismo has evolved since the idea behind it meant "being strong enough to protect and support a family." She argues that the new generation "macho" is overcome with a shame and insecurity that leads him to brutalize women (Anzaldúa 2103). She introduces the idea of "false macho," or a skewed sense of pride among men that influences their view of women. Bolaño's artful exploration of the issue in Juárez is unable to function without the underlying role of machismo and how characters in the novel view women.

Anzaldúa argues that macho culture has changed, and a new sense of "macho" has emerged. Bolaño's depiction of the Juárez killings does not function without the presence of machismo culture and how it has evolved. This evolution emerges in the text when Bolaño writes about the "loss of the sacred" (315). At first the loss of the sacred is used to describe how old, vast, high ceiling, movie theatres have been replaced by smaller multiplexes. Charly Cruz, Bolaño's antagonist, describes the experience of going to the old theatres as both religious and routine. The old generation machismo culture where men valued the strength it took to support their families could also be described as religious and routine; it was fully intertwined with the sanctity of marriage and family. Ironically, Charly Cruz says the loss of the sacred began "in families, when the fathers left the mothers" (315). The sacredness of family takes a hit, yet the need for male dominance remains. As Anzaldúa points out, this leads to an insecure, angry new generation of macho. The influx of women workers adds even more to the insecurity, and the killings are a backlash of this.

The expression of male dominance is also present in the text. Subsequently, both the male and female characters, besides Bo-

laño's protagonist, Oscar Fate, are relatively unbothered by expressions of dominance, even violent ones. When Fate is in a bar with some of his companions, he sees a woman being beaten by a man. Bolaño writes, "The first blow made the woman's head snap back violently and the second blow knocked her down" (318). His description of her head snapping back is horrific, yet no one besides Fate is moved to action. While the woman is down the man then kicks her in the stomach. Bolaño writes, "A few feet away from him he saw Rosa Méndez smiling happily" (319). Even the females in the room are unfazed. When Fate goes to get the man off of her, someone grabs his arm. This is symbolic of how the normal course of action when something like this occurs is to not get involved; both men and women are content in letting the perpetrator handle his own business. The new macho is insecure and dominance orientated, and also accepting of similar behaviors in others. Likewise, the sheer lack of action by all of companions serves as a red flag that a sense of morality is absent in this group. They ultimately represent the rest of city, which amidst a violent killing spree fails to collectively seek justice.

Oscar Fate epitomizes someone who is willing to take action against the atrocities taking place in Juárez. Throughout the beginning of the novel he searches for a cause worth fighting for. He finds his cause in Juárez. While he cannot possibly bring all the killers to justice, he is capable of rescuing Rosa Amalfitano, and in doing so reveals what is missing from the macho culture in Juárez. Fate shows a deep affection and empathy for Rosa that gives him the strength to stand up for her. When questioning why he has not left the city immediately after the fight, Fate admits to himself, "I am here for her" (314). This not only demonstrates his affection, but also foreshadows that he will eventually be forced to come to her aid. Fate's desire to stay in the city for Rosa Amalfitano is juxtaposed with Omar Abdul's comment that, "the women here aren't worth shit," and therefore there is no reason for Fate to stay. However, Fate ultimately considers Rosa as precious to him, so she is worth staying for and worth saving. We see this when he admits to connecting more with Rosa Amalfitano than Rosa Méndez. He

says, “Why do I feel a pang when she looks at me and not when her friend (Méndez) looks at me;” he feels something special for Amalfitano (315). And when the time comes to save her, he knocks out Corona and relishes his victory over injustice. What is missing from macho culture in Juárez is the sense of a sacred bond between a man and a woman, a bond that is considered precious. If a man views a woman as precious he is not going to allow harm to come to her.

As mentioned, many of the victims are factory workers or students. Sources also say the victims are usually slender, brown-skinned, brown-haired, brown-eyed girls. The specificity of the victims combined with the nature of the killings (rape, mutilation, etc) suggests that a sort of fantasy or twisted desire is satisfied in the crimes. The idea of killing is almost eroticized; they are lustful acts of violence. Based on the number of deaths and their covering up by law enforcement, the killers believe they have a right to do what they’re doing. In *The Age of Sex Crime*, Jane Caputi says the killing of women by men is the “ultimate expression of sexuality as a form of power” (Jane Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime*). The killings represent an assertion of male social and sexual power. This need for dominance is directly fueled by the cultural and socio-economic makeup of the city.

The idea of sex as an expression of power is recurring in both *2666: The Part About Fate* and the femicide in Juárez. Bolaño uses images of Rosa Amalfitano staring at a pistol “as if it were a sex-shop contraption,” and the gang rape that occurs in Charly Cruz’s film to express this idea (324, 323). Likewise, the sexual and violent nature of the killings implies that a sort of twisted fantasy is satisfied in the crimes. At the root of the killer’s need to express power or strength is his insecurity. A man’s strength is no longer measured by his ability to support his family; and he resorts to other ways to assert dominance. The sanctity and preciousness of women vanishes.

The solution to femicide begins in the home. Deeply embedded in the mind of the killer is the expectation or stereotype he has for the opposite sex and the differences in power between them. This attitude began developing during childhood. Parents hold the key to their children’s attitudes towards gender;

thus, mothers and daughters must be precious in the minds of fathers and sons. Now, when a perpetrator contemplates killing, he potentially sees his victim as “someone’s sister” or “someone’s mother.” Is he still likely to victimize her? The eight women found on November 1, 2001 are forever connected. They are the eight names on the news story or in the article about gender violence. They are the female students and workers brutally killed and dumped in an abandoned field. And their bodies are laid to unrest in a group, just as they are in the mind of their killer – a mind where no life is precious to another.

“Every hundred feet the world changes” – Roberto Bolaño

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