Staging Femicide/Confronting Reality: Negotiating Gender and Representation in *Las Mujeres de Juárez*

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Abstract:
Focusing on the maquiladora system and the cases of femicide that continue to take place on the U.S.-Mexican border, this paper asks how theatre, in performance and as dramatic literature, can be employed in the form of "staged narrative" to explore human rights violations around the world. I will use Anzaldúa's transfronterista feminist lens, Saldaña's qualitative research framework for ethnodrama, and a feminist view of Brechtian performance theories, in an attempt to unpack some of the gender-based violence issues that seem to be causing the city of Ciudad Juárez to implode on itself. Using *Las Mujeres de Juárez* by Rubén Amavizca, I hope to reinforce Arriola's conclusion that "[i]n general, what can be said about the maquiladora system is that it is hardly a humane system of employment and hardly something the knowing United States citizen would want to support" (809).

> Next to oil, *maquiladoras* are Mexico's second greatest source of U.S. dollars. Working eight to twelve hours a day to wire in backup lights of U.S. autos or solder miniscule wires in TV sets is not the Mexican way. While the women are in the *maquiladoras*, the children are left on their own. Many roam the street, become part of *cholo* gangs. The infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life. (Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* 32)

> I came to Juárez to track down ghosts. And to listen to the mystery that surrounds them. (Lourdes Portillo, *Señorita Extraviada*)

Perpetual Impunity: A Way of Life

1 There will be no answers at the end of this paper. The answers are out there; someone knows who is killing women along the border between Mexico and the United States. Some say this is the resulting phenomenon inevitably plaguing global border cities, "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 25). Examining the localized examples of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and Chihuahua City in Mexico, we find that for every young woman ferociously cut down in the flower of her youth, hundreds more seem to flock from around the country to take her place in the Third World "industrial complex," the *maquiladora*. I intentionally use the term *flock* to convey the brutal carnage to which these women, after almost fifteen years of an ongoing *femicide*,[1] come willingly, like lambs to the slaughter. In her 2001 documentary film, *Señorita Extraviada*, Chicana filmmaker Lourdes Portillo claims, "Juárez is the city of the future. As a model of globalization, Ciudad Juárez is spinning out of control."

[1] The slightly different terms femicide and feminicide are used in different resources to describe what is happening in these cities, as well as in other Third World countries, as a result of globalization.

2 It is nearly impossible to imagine, with the international exposure of this fatal trend, that women would still come, knowing what they must. The workers who come are described in many sources, spanning the fields of law, border studies, gender studies, and popular culture. One law professor explains, "they are often extremely poor, having left barren farmlands in Mexico's interior or impoverished regions that lack adequate health, education, and public services" (Arriola 735). And although one might argue that televisions and Internet access are scarce in the poorest communities scattered throughout the countryside, the news of more than 400 women brutally raped and murdered is ubiquitous in Mexico. But work is work; a salary, no matter how meager, is better than nothing.

3 Another problematic concern is the rampant misinformation formulated by the Mexican government regarding the murders in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City. According to Pheona Donohoe, a writer and activist based in Melbourne, Australia, who has traveled to Ciudad Juárez, "[t]he identity of those responsible for the murders is unknown, although many believe that the government is covering up the truth. For now, at least, the women remain victims of widespread phallic terrorism" ("Women"). A description of the documentary film *Dual Injustice* on the *Witness: See It, Film It, Change It* website, claims that "[a]lthough Chihuahua's Attorney General has referred to the problem of women as a 'myth', a large pink cross filled with embedded nails and hanging nametags for each a [sic] victim sits in front of the Governor's office to remind authorities of the soaring numbers." It is a monument that attests to the fact that, "[i]n 2004, 31 women were brutally killed in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, which represents a 58% increase compared to 2003. In January to March 2005 alone, six bodies have been found so far. Meanwhile, those tortured to confess to the murders sit in jail" (*Witness*).

4 This last piece of information refers to the gender-blind impunity and unchecked injustice that permeates the legal system in which male family members are being arrested, tortured into confessing, tried, and convicted of raping and murdering female victims. One example of this miscarriage of justice is the case of David Meza:

> Neyra Azucena Cervantes was last seen on her way home from school in Chihuahua City around 6pm on May 13th, 2003. When her family learned of her disappearance that evening, they contacted the police. However, as authorities were typically slow to investigate, Neyra's relatives created a task force of family and friends to search for her. Among the many called upon, David Meza, Neyra's cousin, traveled 1,500 miles from the southern state of Chiapas to join their search and demand police assistance. As negligent authorities took a month to put up missing signs of Neyra and reassigned new officers to her case every eight days, the family grew more critical of the police's efforts. As the days and weeks passed, the family increasingly pressured authorities to properly investigate Neyra's disappearance. During a heated discussion in their last meeting with the Attorney General, David directly challenged his competence, to

> which he responded, "You want a culprit? You're going to have him very soon." One week later, David was in jail. (*Witness*)[2]

A report by Amnesty International, titled "Ending the Brutal Cycle of Violence Against Women in Ciudad Juárez and the City of Chihuahua," reinforces these claims:

> Consistent allegations of torture made by suspects detained and interrogated by state judicial police have never been properly investigated, undermining the credibility of investigations and violating the fundamental rights of suspects and families of victims. Despite the risk of grave miscarriages of justice, there have been no advances in the investigation and punishment of torture or independent judicial review of gravely flawed criminal proceedings, which do not adhere to basic fair trial standards. (Amnesty)

5 In another strange twist of the cycle, the U.S. government managed, for over ten years, to turn a blind eye to the tragic misgivings of its neighbor to the South, while still benefiting financially from the enormous profit margin on the border. After all, the vast majority of *maquiladoras* are owned and operated by U.S. Fortune 500 companies. And to make matters worse, when we examine the border from a northern perspective, "the prevailing attitude [is] that whatever happens on the other side is of no concern to Americans, no matter how bad the problem" (Arriola 754). Leslie Sklair's 1992 article in the *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, "The Maquilas in Mexico: A Global Perspective," published prior to the discovery of the first victims in Ciudad Juárez, might be looked at as a harbinger of things that were to come. Sklair explains: "The maquila industry originated in the mid-1960s, when the Mexican government introduced a Border Industrialization Program which permitted Mexican and foreign-owned factories to operate along the border duty free on condition that they exported all their products" (91). Further elaborating on the state of affairs at that time (some fifteen years ago), Sklair reveals that "[t]hese factories, mainly US-owned, were also able to take advantage of tariff regulations covering the re-import of assembled unfinished goods using US-manufactured components. Mexico now has about 2000 maquilas, employing almost half a million workers" (91-92). Ironically, the Introduction to this article foreshadows the fact that "the transnational corporations operating through the maquila industry have created a transnational capitalist class in the border region and have reinforced a culture-ideology of consumerism, and this *has gradually begin to make a significant difference to the ways in which Mexico and the global capitalist system relate to each other*" (92; emphasis added). More prophetic is Sklair's Conclusion, which alleges that the "'maquilisation of Mexico' along

[2] For David's testimony regarding the torture he was subjected to see the Resource Center of the Americas.Org: Working for Human Rights in the Global Economy link at http://www.americas.org/item_27514#DAVID%20MEZA%20ARGUETA%20-%20Testimony%20of%20Torture.

the border" is a "new globalizing force [that] offers not only promises of economic change, but a hidden agenda of a new way of life" (104-105).

6 Who could have known that the "hidden agenda" and this "new way of life" would include the reality that, "[s]ince 1993, more than 400 women have been violently killed and there have been over 4,000 registered complaints of disappeared women in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua. This systemic problem has been called 'feminicide' and has been known as the most embarrassing human rights scandal in Mexico's recent history" (*Witness*). How can a system like this be allowed to continue? Is it really that easy to turn a blind eye and ignore this situation?

Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City: the "Maquilisation of Mexico"

7 My own introduction to the femicide taking place along the Mexico-US border happened in 2001 when I took a graduate level research course called "Borderland Survival Texts: Race, Gender, and Trauma in the Global Age," taught by Dr. Arturo Aldama, who at that time was teaching in the Chicana/o Studies Department at Arizona State University. The class explored multi-media texts and literature, both fiction and non-fiction works, which opened up the scar tissue on what Anzladúa referred to as "*una herida abierta* (an open wound)" (25).

8 In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzladúa vividly sets the stage for the development of a *transfronterista* feminist lens around this open wound explaining that "before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (25). Describing both the physical and metaphorical signification of this geographic construction, she writes, "a border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (25). Her warning is clear: "Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only 'legitimate' inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger" (25-26).

9 As our class progressed, I began to wonder how it was possible that this tragedy had been going on for eight years already (now almost fifteen years) and yet I had never heard the story of these women. It was also in this class that I watched Portillo's chilling documentary, *Señorita Extraviada*, for the first time. I remember driving home from class the night of this

screening, haunted by the images of young women's faces that did not look all that different from my own. I wondered, if our photographs were all placed side by side, would anyone have been able to separate the *maquiladora* workers from the Ph.D. student? I almost wasn't able to separate the images myself.

10 While I make no excuses for my own ignorance up until that point, I have come to realize, through my research, that many people, even to this day, have no idea what is happening in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City. In a report he wrote for *Harper's Magazine* in December 1996, Charles Bowden captures this sense of helplessness brought on by a veiled ignorance that was seemingly unavoidable, albeit unacceptable, in his description of his own introduction to these murders:

> I am here because of a seventeen-year-old girl named Adriana Avila Gress. The whole thing started very simply. I was drinking black coffee and reading a Juárez newspaper, and there, tucked away in the back pages, where the small crimes of the city bleed for a few inches, I saw her face [. . .]. The story said she'd disappeared, all 1.6 meters of her. I turned to a friend I was having breakfast with and said, 'What's this about?' He replied matter-of-factly, 'Oh, they disappear all the time. Guys kidnap them, rape them, and kill them.' Them? Oh, he continued, you know, the young girls who work in the maquiladoras, the foreign-owned factories, the ones who have to leave for work when it is still dark. Of course, I knew that violence is normal weather in Juárez. As a local fruit vendor told an American daily, 'Even the devil is scared of living here.' (44)

I employ this narrative here to establish my conviction that only by telling the human stories related to this tragic border region can we begin to feel something that might even approach an ethical response to the human rights violations brought on by this gender-based calamity.

11 Although I find it troubling that in the 37 page printout of an article published in 2000 by the *DePaul Law Review*, titled "Voices From the Barbed Wires of Despair: Women in the Maquiladoras, Latina Critical Legal Theory, and Gender at the U.S.-Mexico Border," written by visiting law professor Elvia Arriola, there is no mention of the (up to that time) seven year pattern of vicious murders plaguing the region, I do concur with the author on several points. For example, in her report she does elucidate the fact that "[s]ince the 1960s, the American-owned maquiladoras have increasingly employed young women from destitute rural homes in the interior of Mexico to work for miserly wages in assembly plants bearing the icons of multi-national corporations ('MNCs') such as Sony Electronics, Mattel Toys, Casio Manufacturing or Honeywell" (758-759). She goes on to explain how "[t]he law and public policy that enliven the maquiladoras also sustain a widespread corporate practice of exploitative jobs and extreme low wages without providing protection from the unsafe or dangerous working conditions, against the sexual harassment, or the pregnancy discrimination" (759). She concludes, "[i]n this author's humble opinion, narratives are the

only way to get at the heart of the systemic abuses that have been justified in public policy or law [. . .] by both nations. A critical methodology based on narratives will help produce a social justice theory that is not just theory" (759).

12 While Arriola does mention that "[b]etween 1993 and 1996, according to the INS more than 1,000 people died trying to cross the border between Mexico and the United States" (741-742), and although she does point to the fact that "[t]he high number of deaths caused by border crossings, as well as a range of other practices engaged in by the INS, have begun to invite the criticism of international watches for human rights abuses in Mexico and around the world" (750), there is a silencing of voices in her article; the voices of the "[o]ver 370 women [who] have been gang-raped, found savagely mutilated with ritualistic markings, burnt and dumped in the Chihuahua desert" (Donohoe, "Women"). These women never had the chance to even make an attempt to cross the border; the border swallowed them alive. Even while she claims that "many feminist and Latina critical legal theorists have recognized the role of introducing women's 'voice' as a kind of praxis" (757), there seems to be a gag order on her "witnesses." The stories narrated recount the cruel and unjust conditions that exist in the *maquiladoras*, but nothing in this report comes close to the brutal reality:

> Due to the nature of maquiladora shift work, many women are forces to travel long distances to and from work between dusk and dawn. Although the factories provide limited shuttle bus service, many women still travel between their homes and bus terminals involving unsafe and desolate routes. It is on such journeys that many of the women disappear. For those who have relocated to Juárez from other parts of Mexico there are no concerned friends to report them missing to authorities. Many murdered women therefore remain unidentified and unclaimed. Family members from remote towns, villages and farms may never learn about the loss of a female relative. This is perhaps the saddest and most frustrating element of the femicide. These unclaimed and anonymous bodies lose their human context and become mere statistics. (Donohoe, "Women")

13 Perhaps this paper is even more informed by Arriola's article because, in becoming hypersensitive to the absence of these women's stories, I am increasingly adamant that while certain disciplines may tread a safer line, I believe the theatrical stage is an arena where we must risk telling stories that people might not want to hear. I do agree, wholeheartedly, with Arriola that we must "reveal the human drama that underlies this historic economic conflict and inter-dependency between Mexico and the United States [. . .]" (760). We must tell the stories of "workers, of people entitled to the minimum human rights of food, shelter, clothing, education, and medical care" (761). Arriola asserts that "[a] human rights perspective based on women's narratives is able to capture graphically the tremendous social conflict and pain that is [sic] also a byproduct of the wildly 'successful' NAFTA along with the expansion of

the maquiladora program at the border" (761). I believe by combining a human rights perspective with performance theory we approach a critical perspective through which an examination of the difficult truths many people face on a daily basis might be possible.

14 In an essay titled "Instinct over Intellect (Politics): Femicide in Juárez," Donohoe laments the shower of media and pop-culture exploitation raining down on the survivors in the wake of the murders who are bombarded with the "[d]ozens of movies, TV shows, songs, theatre performances, artwork and books [. . .] in production with storylines inspired by the femicide in Juárez, many sensationalizing and glorifying the murders." While I agree that sensationalizing the femicide is unacceptable, there are examples of these representations that have been created for the purpose of educating the public, and some that benefit the families and various agencies that work on their behalf.[3]

15 From my own perspective — as both an artist and scholar — I believe theatre, in performance and as dramatic literature, can be employed in the form of "staged narrative" to explore human rights violations around the world. In this paper I will use Anzaldúa's *transfronterista* feminist lens, Saldaña's qualitative research framework for ethnodrama, and a feminist view of Brechtian performance theories, in an attempt to unpack some of the gender-based violence issues that seem to be causing this city to implode on itself. Using *Las Mujeres de Juárez* by Rubén Amavizca[4], I hope to reinforce Arriola's conclusion that "[i]n general, what can be said about the maquiladora system is that it is hardly a humane system of employment and hardly something the knowing United States citizen would want to support" (809).

16 Rafael Loret de Mola opens his book *Ciudad Juárez* with the words, "Yes it's true: one has to live in Ciudad Juárez to understand it" (15; my translation). For the sake of the women in Juárez, and women around the world living the same nightmare, I believe we must turn the spotlight on this atrocity — whether or not we ever get the chance to visit, let alone live in Ciudad Juárez. I have seen how theatre has the potential to motivate a dialogue around issues of social justice beyond the stage. It is this potential that I hope to reveal through this paper.

[3] During the production I write about in this article of Rubén Amavizca's *Las Mujeres de Juárez*, Casa Amiga, Amnesty International USA and the Red Cross of Mexico were among the entities that benefited from our performances both in the United States and Mexico. In addition, on May 10, 2005, the play was performed on an outdoor stage in front of the Arizona State Capitol after a day of rallies that were conducted for immigrants' rights. Several of the cast members traveled to Ciudad Juárez the night before to escort several of the mothers across the border so that they could be in the audience. This play is not intended to exploit the families, but to bring this subject to light.

[4] At this time this play has not received formal publication, although it has been produced in several cities in both the United States and Mexico.

Staging Injustice/Staging Reality

17 In 1955, Bertolt Brecht asked: "Can the present-day world be reproduced by means of theatre?" (Willet 274). Excerpts from his own response to this query reveal his conviction that "[the] time has passed when a reproduction of the world by means of theatre need only be capable of being experienced. To be an experience it needs to be accurate" (Willet 274). In addition, according to Brecht, "the present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as capable of transformation" (Willet 274). I hope to show how theatre addressing the femicide in Ciudad Juárez reveals a world that people want to change. As Diana Taylor described the "theatre of crisis" written by several major playwrights from Latin America in the late 1960s, this type of theatre "is far more complex and contradictory than any purely instrumental theatre. Rather than propose any clear directions or answers, this theatre explores the critical situation with all its ruptures and contradictions, with all its political dangers and ideological blind spots" (9). Like the playwrights in Taylor's critical text, who include José Triana of Cuba, Griselda Gambaro of Argentina, Emilio Carballido of Mexico, Enrique Buenaventura of Colombia, and Egon Wolff of Chile, I believe Amavizca joins the ranks of "dramatists who do believe in theatre as a vehicle for social change, albeit the slow and difficult-to-measure change of educating an audience" (18).

***Las Mujeres de Juárez* by Rubén Amavizca**

> *Various cast members*: Twelve years, four hundred women murdered, and not one responsible party. Twelve years, four hundred women murdered, and mountains of lies. Twelve years, four hundred women murdered, and tons of impunity. Twelve years, four hundred women murdered, and walls of silence.
>
> *Madre*: The only thing we ask for is justice. That the murders be solved and that the governments do something to stop it. We want to live and work in peace. Be able to walk in the street without the fear that one of us may not return someday. We ask you to join us and shout, Enough! Is that too much to ask?"
> (Amavizca, Scenes 30 and 31; my translation)

18 After the actors onstage[5] recite the names of almost two hundred women whose bodies have been identified in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, this simple question is begged of the audience. "Is that too much to ask?" Los Angeles based playwright Rubén Amavizca continues to revise his ethnodrama *Las Mujeres de Juárez* against the backdrop of the real life

[5] All references to the staging of this play contained in this essay refer to my work as the director of the 2005 production in Phoenix, Arizona, under the aegis of Teatro Bravo. This version was subsequently produced by the Latino Research Center at the University of Nevada, Reno; as a benefit for the Red Cross of Mexico in Puerto Peñasco, Mx; and finally, in 2006 during the Western Regional Conference of Amnesty International USA in Tucson, Arizona. All references to the text of the play are based on the script used for this production and may not reflect revisions made by the playwright. The version of the text used is on file with the author of this paper.

tragedy afflicting young women on the border between Juárez and El Paso, Texas. When I met with the playwright in Los Angeles during a symposium at the University of Southern California in March 2005, he explained that the latest revisions he had made to his play were the results of finding out that a majority of the fathers involved in these unsolved murders have mysteriously died within two to five years of their daughters' disappearances. Alcoholism, depression, and suicide have claimed the lives of men who feel helpless in a situation where there are no answers.

19 This gripping text has been ripped from the headlines of both North American and Mexican periodicals, official reports issued by Amnesty International, the Penal Code of the State of Chihuahua, and even the Prevention Campaign launched by the police force of Ciudad Juárez to promote the safety of the city's female inhabitants. Coupled with Brecht's question regarding the theatre of his time, I took the mother's question from the final scene of Amavizca's play and began asking my own questions regarding how theatre could be used to expose human rights violations and motivate social activism in its many forms. I believe it was serendipity that while I was directing this play, Johnny Saldaña's latest book, *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*, was published by Altamira Press.

20 I encountered the first answer to my questions in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln's foreword to the series "Crossroads in Qualitative Research," in which Saldaña's book appears. They assert their "belief that the performance-based human disciplines can contribute to radical social change" (ix). After our opening night performance, one of the actors was approached by a gentleman in the lobby of the theatre. The audience member admitted, through tears, that he had read many articles, watched the news on countless occasions, and had been confronted with this material through the media's representation of young women who deserved what they got, and yet, for the first time, the humanity of the situation touched his heart. That night, through theatre, we reached into the audience and brought these atrocities to light.

21 According to Saldaña, the goal of ethnotheatre "is to investigate a particular facet of the human condition for the purposes of adapting those observations and insights into a performance medium" (1). Amavizca has not only crafted his play through technical research involving the history and official documentation of these cases, he has also explored the very human side of this tragedy. The first time I met Norma Andrade and her daughter, Maria Luisa Garcia Andrade — mother and sister to Ligia Alejandra Garcia Andrade, whose lifeless body was found wrapped in a blanket in a waste ground close to a factory in Ciudad Juárez on February 21, 2001 — they were traveling with Rubén. Amavizca's connection to the families

and their lives is real, it is genuine, and it speaks through his play, *Las Mujeres de Juárez*.

22 In making the claim that "all playwrights are ethnodramatists," Saldaña underscores the core of theatre as "both a forum and medium for expressing the sociopolitical climate of the times" (4). The sociopolitical climate of the times in Ciudad Juárez is dismal, with no end in sight to these heinous crimes. As I researched the seemingly never ending paper trail of news articles and circuitous links on the Internet, questions turned into more questions, while the answers seemed to linger just beyond the grasp of authorities. As a theatre artist committed to using the art form as a weapon against social injustice and oppression, I stand behind Saldaña's claim that,

> With ethnographic performance [. . .] comes the responsibility to create an entertainingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative. Ethnotheatre reveals a living culture through its character-participants, and if successful, the audience learns about their world and what it's like to live in it. (14)

In this project, however, the challenge was to reveal to the audience the double edged reality of what it is like to die on the border between Mexico and the United States, and what families must do to survive in the aftermath of these tragic losses.

Difficult Moments

23 At this point I turn to the challenges I faced as a director confronting the most difficult moments captured in *Las Mujeres de Juárez*. My choices are a direct reflection of my attempt to echo Saldaña's assertion that "the 'reality-based' mounting of human life onstage is a risky enterprise" (32). Amavizca's play calls for the staged representation of the physical violence, rape, and murder enacted upon the vulnerable protagonist of the play, Maritza López Pérez.

24 In Scene 9 of Amavizca's text, a graphic depiction of two assailants is narrated through stage directions (18-21). The first time I read the play I was physically repulsed by the stark description of a young woman being physically brutalized by two men. The jolt caused by reading this scene in the play reminds me of Charles Bowden's account of seeing a certain photograph in Ciudad Juárez:

> Jaime Bailleres has projected a beautiful black carved mask on the screen. The head is tilted and the face is smooth with craftsmanship. The hair is long and black. It takes a moment for me to get past this beauty and realize that the face is not a mask. She is a sixteen-year-old girl with a forgotten name. She was found in the park by a bridge linking Juárez to El Paso; the park on both sides of the Rio Grande is dedicated to friendship between the two nations. The girl's skin has blackened in the sun, and the face contracted as it mummified. She was kidnapped, raped, murdered [. . .]. The lips of the girl pull back, revealing her clean white teeth. Sounds pour from her mouth. She is screaming and screaming and screaming. (46)

Staging the violent scene depicted in Amavizca's script would entail giving voice to the scream described by Bowden. After the initial shock that came from reading the text, I forced myself, as a director, to visualize my own interpretation of this all too vivid scene.

25 As a woman I wondered how the portrayal would affect the actress playing Maritza. The repetition of a scene such as this, through a production schedule of several weeks, had the potential to cause irrevocable psychological damage to anyone. My mind shifted to the men, actors who would have to perform this barbarous act, over and over again. The images were disturbing, regardless of the fact that they would be choreographed and rehearsed. And then it came to me, a solution materializing in my mind as a projection on the silver screen.

26 Ultimately, my concern was to respectfully portray the victims in these circumstances, without sugar-coating their experiences. I knew that, in reality, I would never be able to even come close to capturing the horror of the last few moments of these women's lives, but I had to make an attempt to give them back there voices. I needed to reach audience members in an attempt to motivate change. I was also determined to show consideration for the continuing struggles of the families fighting for justice in Ciudad Juárez. An informational pamphlet distributed by the organization, "Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa" [May Our Daughters Return Home], describes their experience:

> The situation of femicide in Ciudad Juárez has placed us in a vulnerable position, as we are poor families who are faced with serious difficulties in trying to confront our daily lives. Added to this, the tragedy of losing our daughters has changed our lives. Our physical and emotional health has been seriously damaged, as we have also lost other loved ones, like fathers, brothers, sisters, and children who have succumbed to their ill health fighting in an as of yet unfruitful struggle, caused by the pain of searching for a clarification of the crimes and a demand for justice, which has required of our part procedures and negotiations necessitating large emotional expenditures and a significant decrease in our physical health. (my translation)

This nightmare is all too real for many of the citizens of Ciudad Juárez who live in constant fear of losing another loved one. The formidable task before me was to do justice to a situation in which Justice played no part.

27 As a director I was faced with a question regarding the medium through which to present this scene. In a production directed by the playwright himself, performed by his company, Grupo de Teatro SINERGIA of Los Angeles, Amavizca chose to stage the rape scene in shadow, behind a scrim. My artistic interpretation of this scene relied on my own answer to the inquiry posed by Johnny Saldaña, who asks, "will the participant's story be credibly, vividly, and persuasively told for an audience through a traditional written report, video documentary, photographic portfolio, website, poetry, dance, music, visual art installation, or ethnodrama" (2)? In this production of *Las Mujeres de Juárez*, I chose to

marry the forms of film and theatre to create a multi-media performance incorporating video technology projected on a screen at the center of the stage.

28 My main concern with staging the rape live was the averted gaze of audience members who might not wish to witness such a graphic violation of human rights. I believe that we, as a society, have been conditioned to accept the graphic depiction of war, violence, sexually explicit acts, and death on film much more readily than we tolerate these same acts live and in person. There is an aesthetic distance provided by the screen that affords the public a sense of separation from the harsh reality being depicted. In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey writes "[T]he extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation" (186). Furthermore, "[a]lthough the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world" (Mulvey 186).

29 This method of depicting the act of violence through film, rather than live, derives its effectiveness from the technique *Verfremdungseffekt* described here by Elin Diamond with excerpts from Bertolt Brecht's writing:

> The cornerstone of Brecht's theory is the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh: 'a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar'; 'the A-effect consists of turning an object from something ordinary and immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected.' (79)

It is unfortunate that we live in times during which the portrayal of sexual violence and murder are so common, especially in Hollywood films where they approach being glamorized, that an audience would need to be manipulated into realizing that this stark interpretation of human aggression is based on real events. I needed to be sure the audience would be jarred by what they saw through the camera. Phoenix based Chicano filmmaker, Luke Dorsett, approached the filming of this piece from the perspective of the aggressors. Although the audience never sees the faces of the two rapists, the effect is one similar to Mulvey's description of Hitchcock's work in that the "liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw[s] the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze" (192).

30 During one of the performances in Phoenix, the filmed portion of this production caused one audience member to walk out into the lobby where, according to the Executive Producer of the company, he complained that the depiction was gross and unnecessary. A

representative from Amnesty International who was stationed in the lobby to distribute information regarding the situation in Ciudad Juárez questioned this audience member directly. He asked how this man could walk out of the theatre. Hundreds of young women, he explained, have lost their lives in incidents unimaginably worse than what was depicted on the screen, and yet, because it took this audience member out of his comfort zone he chose to walk out and avoid watching. Those young women never had the choice to walk away. As a result, the audience member reentered the theatre admitting that he would have to think about that. Planting these seeds of social consciousness is, for me, a crucial aspect of ethnotheatre.

The Absence of the Female Voice Speaks Louder than Words

31 Another problematic issue I faced in staging Amavizca's play was the fact that the playwright had written a series of narrator scenes, interspersed throughout the text, in which these characters commented on the situation and circumstances in Ciudad Juárez. These were often like sound bites from Public Service Announcements and Infomercials. In the script, Amavizca indicates that one of the narrators should be male and the other female.

32 After having engaged in weeks of research about the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, I was sure of one thing; the only certainty was a silencing of women's voices. It made no sense to me, as the director of the play, to act as if women were given "equal stage time" in the reality of this situation. My artistic choice was therefore to cast only males in the roles of the narrators. I also chose to give each of the narrators an iconic character to portray that would represent certain men in the patriarchal structure of this border culture. Although these specific designations do not appear in Amavizca's script, these narrators contributed to my director's concept for the staging of this play.

33 As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, in the socially constructed order of things, "[w]omen are at the bottom of the ladder, one rung above the deviants. The Chicano, *mexicano*, and some Indian cultures have no tolerance for deviance. Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants" (40). In the situation created by the femicide in Mexico, women's status seems to drop a rung in this ladder and they are no longer above anyone. Through Anzaldua's *transfronterista* lens, "[w]oman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey" (42).

34 In my interpretation of Amavizca's play, the narrators all frame the experiences of the women of Ciudad Juárez, while simultaneously repressing their very existence. Diamond elaborates on this notion of *difference* in "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a

Gestic Feminist Criticism." A selection of this essay is reprinted in *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Coursebook*, in which she explains:

> Each action must contain the trace of the action it represses, thus the meaning of each action contains difference. The audience is invited to look beyond representation — beyond what is authoritatively put in view — to the possibilities of as yet unarticulated actions or judgements [sic] [. . .].

The Brechtian 'not, but' is the theatrical and theoretical analog to the subversiveness of sexual difference, but it allows us to imagine the deconstruction of gender — and all other — representations. Such deconstructions dramatize, at least at the level of theory, the infinite play of difference that Derrida calls *écriture* — the superfluity of signification that places meaning beyond capture within the covers of the play or the hours of performance. This is not to deny Brecht's wish for an intrusive, analytical theatre; on the contrary, it invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility for which Brecht most devoutly wished, that signification (the production of meaning) continue beyond the play's end, congealing into choice and action after the spectator leaves the theatre. (80-81)

This reading informed my casting choices as I selected the different iconic characters to narrate the story in Amavizca's play.

35 Among the roles I employed were a *cholo* gang member, a priest, a forensic doctor, and a police officer of Juárez. There were even two *maquiladora* guards who smoked a joint of marijuana out behind the factory, illustrating the absolute impunity in this situation. In a Brechtian breaking of the fourth wall, there are two narrators who comb their way through and around the audience with two sticks, much the same way men and women comb through the terrain of the desert, searching for the remains of their loved ones.

36 The first narrator, the *cholo*, addresses the audience directly and informs them that the women of Juárez are "asking for it" by the way they act and dress. The men looking for human remains in the desert speak of the increase in employment in Juárez, but add that the cost of this increase is the young women who work in the factories have to travel late at night and for great distances to get to their jobs.

37 The guards at the *maquiladora* (progressively getting more and more stoned through the scene off of the joint they are sharing) explain to each other that 70% of the multinational corporations on the Fortune 500 list use these component factories in Mexico. This number increases annually and the absurdity is that these companies don't pay a single peso in taxes. One adds, there are over 3000 factories that employ more than a million people around the world and they produce over $40 billion worth of goods. The other clarifies: 98% of the production in Mexican *maquiladoras* is from the United States and 90% of the factories can

be found on the border between the U.S. and Mexico. One third of these, he cackles, are right here, in Ciudad Juárez! The laughter induced by the drugs creates an eerie discomfort juxtaposed with the information being narrated in the lines. The audience is left to wonder, if these are "the guards," who is protecting the women inside the factory?

38 The priest begs the audience to demand justice. He explains that we cannot allow society and the media to continue to refer to these victims as the "dead women of Juárez," because one dies from natural causes (scene 26). These women, he insists, were brutally assassinated, and that is not the same. We must give them the dignity they deserve and refer to them as the "murdered women of Juárez" (scene 26). Only then, he persists, will we be recognizing and admitting the atrocity of this situation.

39 By using this gendered staging device I intended to highlight the silencing of the women's voices through the representation of absence. Their stories are being told through the patriarchal voice that has oppressed them in the most violent of ways and left them silently screaming.

Opening a Forum for Dialogue: Is that too much to ask?

40 Bringing this issue to the public of Phoenix, Arizona (and subsequently to other cities in both the United States and Mexico) was, in my mind, a critical step in motivating a dialogue and educating the community about the intolerable injustices inflicted upon the population of Ciudad Juárez. In some cases, we need to be taken out of our comfort zone to confront issues that require the efforts of a global community to place pressure on authorities to carry out a more thorough investigation into barbaric acts in violation of human rights. I am reminded once again of Brecht's essay. Although he was referring to a different world, at a distinct time period, I believe his words ring true, even today:

> It will hardly surprise you to hear me say that the question of describing the world is a social one. I have maintained this for many years, and now I live in a state where a vast effort is being made to transform society. You may not approve of the means used — I hope, by the way, that you are really acquainted with them, and not just from the papers; you may not accept this particular ideal of a new world — I hope you are acquainted with this too; but you can hardly doubt that in the state where I live the transformation of the world, of [people's] life together is being worked at. And you may perhaps agree with me that the present-day world can do with transforming. (Willet 275)

41 After a matinee performance of *Las Mujeres de Juárez*, I encountered the President of Phoenix College who had been in the audience that afternoon. When she asked me what else she could do to help in this situation, I assured her that, first and foremost, her willingness to invite a Latino production company to produce this play in the theatre on her campus and

offer it to the community was a significant gesture and an unprecedented act of good will in Phoenix, Arizona. Opening a forum in which these issues could be presented to a broader population was the first step in promoting awareness and inspiring action. I was comforted by the fact that audience members like her left the theatre that day with the question echoing in their minds and hearts, "Is that too much to ask?"

Hope for the Future?

42 A little over a year ago in an announcement in the "Good News" section of the Amnesty International Australia website reads:

> Mexico/USA: Legislation condemns murders of women
> 5 May 2006
> Amnesty International welcomes the congressional passage of legislation calling on the United States and Mexico to work together to find an end to the violence against women in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, where more than 400 women and girls have been murdered since 1993.
> The United States Congress rarely passes free-standing resolutions expressing concern about human rights conditions in a friendly country such as Mexico. The situation in Juarez and Chihuahua is so bad, however, that the US Congress could no longer ignore it. Congress has now unanimously called on the Secretary of State and the US Ambassador to Mexico to take specific steps to ensure that addressing these horrendous murders becomes a part of the US - Mexico bilateral agenda.
> This is an extraordinary and historic event. By pressing Mexican authorities to make every effort to stop the killings, the secretary of state and ambassador to Mexico can help to ensure justice in Chihuahua. (Amnesty Australia)

As I returned to the dramaturgical research I conducted over two years ago in preparation to direct Amavizca's play, a curious thing happened. I was rereading many of the articles I had accessed previously and noticed a date highlighted in several documents from the Internet searches I had completed. Both the Amnesty International and Witness websites make mention, as I have done earlier in this article, of Neyra Azucena Cervantes's disappearance on May 13, 2003. Today is May 13, 2007; are we any closer to justice? I met Neyra's mother, Patricia Cervantes at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico, during the J. Paul Taylor Social Justice Symposium: Justice for Women in March 2006. She was selling bags and other crafts to raise money. After talking to her for a while I bought a pink burlap bag that has the words "*solo por ser mujer*" (just for being a woman) sewn into the fabric with a simple black yarn. She explained to me that she was still trying to save up enough money for a headstone for her daughter's grave. These women, like all women of the world, deserve dignity and justice.

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