An Urban Cartography of Murder: Gaspar de Alba's Desert Blood

Esther Álvarez López
Universidad de Oviedo[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

Twenty years after the first death was reported in 1993, the factual mass obliteration of women through extreme forms of gender violence is still taking place in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, where, as of 2007, an estimated four hundred and fifty women (Fernández and Rampal 16) had been kidnapped, raped, brutally tortured, mutilated, murdered, and finally dumped in empty lots in the desert and other areas of the urban geography. Figures vary depending on sources,[2] as do theories concerning the probable killers or the motives behind these murders and disappearances.[3] The events organized around the Juárez murders — art exhibitions, demonstrations, performances, V-Days, conferences, etc. — together with an ever growing number of books, newspaper and scholarly articles, reports, films, and songs, have attempted to explain, shed light on, or simply denounce this intolerable femicide plaguing the border. Likewise, fictionalized renditions of the murders have been written by authors of different provenances who draw on one or more of the handful of popular theories to build their plots.[4] In *Desert Blood. The Juárez Murders* (2005), Alicia Gaspar de Alba posits the idea that free trade and the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), with its attendant economic, social, and cultural consequences for young women, are cardinal causes underpinning the murders.[5]

The author resorts to the popular formula of the whodunit, which she uses as a scalpel to effectively open up and remove the "huge malignant tumor of silence" (2005: 335) that has enshrined the Juárez murders for as long as two decades. In trying to elucidate the complex, tragic mystery of the who and why of the sexual assaults and brutal slayings, Gaspar de Alba guides readers in a journey through a violent border cityscape where two distinct but intersecting systems—one economic and global, the other socio-cultural-sexual and local—connive to devalue and depreciate the feminine,

and ultimately to destroy women. In the novel, she leads readers on a dramatic tour de force through this violent reality while unpicking the serial sexual murders from a feminist, border perspective, connecting the dots that reveal the fatal link between Mexican traditional cultural values, the transgression of gendered spaces, and the new global social order on the Mexico-U.S. border as they coalesce and take on their macabre shape in Ciudad Juárez/El Paso.

This paper aims to analyze the spatial demarcations that characterize gender and gender relations in these "Siamese," "twin cities umbilically connected" (Gaspar de Alba 2005: 23, 7) of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Likewise, it will examine the cartography of murder, revealing how violence has become so geographically pervasive that it has en/gendered a failed city. By paying special attention to place, by having her protagonist Ivon Villa move constantly through city streets — in her cousin William's truck, by car, taxi, or even in a patrol car — and other representative areas — *colonias*, red-light district, bridges, etc. — Gaspar de Alba turns urban locations in Juárez, and indeed the city itself, into yet another character in her story. In fact, these city spaces are all crucial, not only to create verisimilitude or an appropriate atmosphere and setting, following formulaic rules for crime novels, but unfortunately for the hundreds of victims in real life, they also figure prominently as either emblematic sites in the actual commission of these criminal acts or as being (in)directly involved in their perpetration. What we see in both Ciudad Juárez/El Paso and *Desert Blood* is a border cityscape where the impact of globalization, the conflicting terrains of public vs. private, and femicide ultimately intersect.

2. THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF MURDER

In the now classic formulation of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), the border is an "open wound" where "the Third World grates against the First and bleeds" (25)... literally so in Ciudad Juárez. According to former FBI agent Robert K. Ressler, the very nature of the area itself, together with migration and the traffic of human beings and drugs, make this "twilight zone," this unknown dimension (González Rodríguez 14) a more than suitable terrain for the perpetration of criminal acts. In a gendered, sexualized interpretation, Rosa Linda Fregoso (53) aptly sustains that in the cultural imaginary of both Mexico and the United States, the border is "the trope for absolute alterity, a 'no-man's-land' symbolizing erotized underdevelopment — an untamed breeding ground for otherness and the site of unrepressed libidinal energies." Since 1993 this trope of otherness has had a dramatic materialization in an unacceptable death toll for women, thus becoming one of the most tragic typifications of the continuum of anti-female terror in contemporary times, an era for which Jane Caputi (1988) has coined the expression "the age of sex crime." Following scholar-

turned-amateur detective Ivon Villa in her traumatic journey back and forth between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso and through specific areas of both border cities searching for her kidnapped sister, Irene, the reader can map the spatial and social cartography of these killings.

Sprouting uncontrollably in desert areas as a result of rapid and speculative *maquila* expansion, the marginal, impoverished *colonias* of Juárez are an example of the new forms of 'urbanity' that en/gender violence as a result of economic blight, social disintegration, and exclusion. The unwholesome conditions of these *colonias* are not easy to endure: without roads, water or electricity, and shelter being provided largely by cardboard, shingle, and plastic constructions that spring up among the debris of (toxic) industrial waste, life is always on the brink of death. In *Desert Blood*, a character describes these *colonias* as "just a hole of danger, especially for women" (Gaspar de Alba 2005: 22), and true to this, it is in one of them that Ivon's sister is kidnapped and then commercialized for an illegal online business. Furthermore, the young female *maquila* workers who live in these shantytowns on the outskirts of the city, often distant from their plants, must commute in buses or walk to and from work in the dark or through poorly lit areas when they miss their transport or are denied access to their workplaces for being late. Either way, their safety always compromised, they become easy targets for sexual assault (Arriola 44; Volk and Schlotterbeck 129).

Generally speaking, the rise of the city as the locus for habitation has both enhanced and constricted women's lives. Whereas the constriction stems from the social and spatial boundaries erected to maintain a sense of border between self (male-public) and other (female-private), enhancement is usually the result of its transgression. As David Sibley observes (32), "crossing boundaries, from a familiar space to an alien one which is under the control of somebody else, can provide anxious moments; in some circumstances it could be fatal, or it might be an exhilarating experience –the thrill of transgression." These words could well describe the situation of women in Ciudad Juárez, with that oxymoronic combination of fatality and exhilaration that rules out the 'either...or' dichotomy of Sibley's pattern and replaces it with the probabilities of a 'both' (fatal) 'and' (exhilarating) that characterize this particular context.

Transgressing the divide between public and private, young women, who have become a significant group of wage earners, leave their traditional roles in confining homes behind looking forward to the temptations and pleasures of city life. After endless and grueling hours of tedious jobs, they can socialize and enjoy the numerous bars, clubs, and restaurants that cater to them in the old downtown area. Seeking information that may lead her to her sister, the protagonist of *Desert Blood*, Ivon Villa, inevitably drops by some of these locales, including the bars and brothels that proliferate in the Juárez red-light district, known as La Mariscal, where young girls and

women are either offered as sexual (tourist) attractions or picked as murder victims. As a matter of fact, Ivon is warned by a bartender that her (American) outfit—khaki shorts, *Sparks* jersey, and running shoes—is not suitable for walking La Mariscal and might lead her into unsought trouble. She, in turn, knows that she cannot expect the law enforcement agents to help her, should something happen to her, for "although policemen are all over the street, they are worse than the *cholos* or the thieves" (Gaspar de Alba 2005: 189).

As in many other urban contexts, in Ciudad Juárez the street is gendered male. Women run a high risk if they hang out at, are alone in, or transit territories where they are exposed to danger. This symbolic codification of urban space as a 'geography of women's fear' (Valentine) ultimately affects the specific decisions they make about their movements. Spatial control is enforced on them through either the threat of violence or through actual violence, which in either case ends up limiting their mobility by inhibiting their use of space and consequently their freedom. Ivon Villa experiences firsthand how vulnerable females are when they are out on the city streets in one of her urban encounters: "'*Ven acá*,'" a man beckons to her, "'*Qué vendes?*'" ["Come here. What are you selling?"]. The sexual innuendo of this expression plays with the underlying notion that (all) women are prostitutes—sell their bodies—just because they occupy/appropriate/enjoy public space. When, undaunted, Ivon retorts back, the man calls her '*puta*' [whore] (2005: 21), an offensive, albeit very common, insult used to silence and discredit women when they speak or act contrary to men's wishes. As if to emphasize the overriding predatory male sexual culture in Juárez that sees women only as a body to be violated with words or deeds, Ivon becomes once again the object of sexual harassment: even though in her search through the city she is accompanied by her cousin William, she nonetheless confronts a drunk who, interpreting her physical aspect and attire that for him translate as lesbian, asks her "*¿No quieres verga?*" ["Don't you want cock?"] (190), as he makes lewd gestures at her, moving his hips up and down. Prompted as much by his repulsive act as by the erection she sees though his jeans, she responds verbally—"I'd rather eat shit"—and spits in the man's direction, while her cousin William blushes but does not do anything to defend or protect her. Ivon's unexpected 'unwomanly' attitude elicits an angry reaction from the drunk, who spits back and proffers an alternative insult to '*puta*,' "*Pinche pocha, hija de la chingada*" (190). This derogatory expression derives its meaning from Malinche Tenepal, *la chingada* or 'the fucked one,' the articulate, strong woman traditionally considered by Mexicans as a traitor and a sell-out because of her relationship with Spanish Hernán Cortés. As Malinche, lesbians are considered sell-outs, traitors to the Chicano heteronormative family and to the *Raza*.

By means of an array of urban spaces and place names, Gaspar de Alba shows in *Desert Blood* that in Ciudad Juárez nothing is what it actually seems to be. She

reveals that there is always a sinister humor or macabre twist to its reality, as befits a city that up to 2012 had notoriously been first in the rank of most violent, dangerous, and murderous cities in the world, but where inexplicably life goes on in apparent normalcy. Not surprisingly, some place names often point to an ambivalent discrepancy between signifiers and their physical referents in reality: Elysian Fields, a development behind an industrial park, "looked surreal, like *simulated reality*" (269, emphasis added). The stench that emanates out of the ground of what appears to be an idyllic community — "it looks as a kind of place to go for Sunday picnics and barbecues" (Gaspar de Alba 2010: 85) — does, however, make sense to the protagonist, as Elysian Fields was the name in Greek mythology for heaven, "which was just another place for the dead" (2005: 270), and, in fact, "there are skull-and-crossbones warning signs posted throughout" (2010: 85).

This semantic distortion is ultimately undone by the death undertones that usually accompany such names: Ivon cannot but note the inherent irony behind beautiful or noble place names such as the Truth Apartments, "where [Richard] Ramirez's cousin, a Vietnam vet named Max, had shot his own wife in front of twelve-year-old Richy [who would later on become serial killer The Night Stalker]" (271). Death is likewise represented in the terms assigned to other urban areas, from the Avenida de las Víboras [Avenue of the Vipers], in Ciudad Juárez (215), to La Calavera [The Skull], in El Paso (294). It may also be lurking in means of transportation such as the *maquiladora* buses that take the women from the *colonias* to their workplaces and back, which end up being vehicles of torture and lethal traps.[6] In one of the alleys of Juárez, Ivon finds one of these buses parked in front of an abandoned building with "La Cruz Roja" spelled out on the destination panel: "More Mexican humor, Ivon thought, naming the decrepit old bus after the Red Cross" (205). What Ivon does not yet know, though, is that what she thinks to be Mexican humor will be revealed to be the most hideous kind of black humor: the bus she sees does not in fact take passengers to any such destination. In an ironic twist, it has been converted into an eerie sort of prison-cage where the women are held before they are eventually killed. Thus, instead of offering assistance and relief to the ailing or needy, as does the Red Cross, the bus transports the victims from Juárez to their tragic destination in ASARCO, El Paso, an old copper refinery on the American side of the border that has become the site of a profitable online porn and snuff business. With its "twin phalluses" of smokestacks "rising into the azure desert sky" (330) "like sentinels of death" (295), the American factory is, again ironically, located near a religious symbol of eternal life and redemption: a forty-foot, white-robed limestone statue of Christ the Redeemer atop Mount Cristo Rey that "stretches its crucified arms out like a holy bridge between the First World and the Third, like a mirage of faith across the desert" (236).

Christ the Redeemer will become a key lead in Ivon's investigation into Irene's kidnapping, resulting in the solution to the mystery and the dismantling of the dot.com business that thrives almost at the statue's feet. Just as a professional detective would do, she manages to decipher the words in some bathroom graffiti in a city nightclub she visits in search of her sister; the oft-quoted expression of Porfirio Díaz, "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States," has been scratched on the wall, and key words have been changed to create the palimpsestic message "Poor Juárez, so far from the Truth so close to Jesus" that, when read in both the Mexican and the Juárez keys, doubles its political, economic, and social meaning, while adding a politics of religion dimension which the novel also tackles. However, it is only later that Ivon will connect this bathroom graffiti to the actual scene of the crimes.

Unlike the "holy bridge" represented by a Jesus Christ lovingly, though ineffectually, extending his arms to embrace a ruthless borderland, the various bridges that simultaneously bring together and separate the two cities across the Río Grande—the Córdoba Bridge, the Santa Fe Bridge, and the International Bridge—stand as injurious links in this border cityscape, connecting the First and the Third Worlds for felons who cross over from the American side to commit their crimes in Mexico. As Gaspar de Alba's research shows, in the mid-nineties more than 600 registered sex offenders were given one-way tickets to El Paso after getting parole; by September 2000 the number had increased to 745, and to 751 the next year (2010: 75), thus turning this city into a dumping ground for perverts, part of the "toxic fallout of the North American Free Trade Agreement" (2010: 76), and making the border, by extension, "a dumping ground for all forms of pollution" (2005: 310). In the novel, bridges stand likewise as mute witnesses not only to the murders but also to corruption when law enforcement agents on both sides — customs officials, Border Patrol agents, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) people — get involved in or even orchestrate illegal activities (2005: 154),[7] and furthermore when a "bilateral assembly line of other perpetrators" (2005: 335) — politicians, public officials, the press, businessmen, etc. — protect the murderers or conspire to cover up these horrendous crimes. It is at the US Customs Building itself on Córdoba Bridge — where Ivon is illegally arrested by INS officers — that she learns of the direct participation of US officials in the snuff business, the kidnappings, and other crimes that are devastating the area. As a reminder of both Mexico's and the United States' connection with the commissioning of the crimes, on top of their negligence or lack of interest in stopping and solving them,[8] the International Bridge Paso del Norte has been chosen by those who are pressing for a proper investigation into the murders and disappearances to bear a wooden cross with an inscription that reads, "Ni una más," the cross being the symbol of resistance as well as standing in recognition of the officially unacknowledged victims of Ciudad Juárez.

Desert Blood brings to the fore the intersection between globalization (*maquilas*), pornography, sexual violence, and femicide, which ultimately unite the communities of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso on either side of the Mexican-U.S. border under the same global sexual-economic system: just as the United States is responsible for shoving the *maquilas* "down Mexico's throat" (Gaspar de Alba 2005: 252), this representative nation of the First World is, as the novel indicates, directly accountable for the murders through the INS officers who are involved in the pornographic website and who commit many of the killings — shoving coins down the women's bodies — becoming an accomplice through the connivance of the judicial system and other state institutions. Thus, the murders acquire a transnational dimension and not just a specific local one. The novel discloses an urban cartography of murder involving these cities, which function as the epicenter of a ubiquitous geography of fear that dramatically restricts women's lives, thwarts their freedom, and eventually kills them.

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NOTES

[1] The research carried out for the writing of his essay is part of the I+D+I project "Embodied Encounters and Alternative Knowledges: Inhabiting and Creating the City" (MultipliCity), ref. FFI2013-4564-R, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

[2] Official statistics do not match the figures of NGOs and other independent institutions. In *La ciudad de las muertas. La tragedia de Ciudad Juárez*, Marcos Fernández and Jean-Christophe Rampal provide a list with the names of the 450 victims that they had registered up to the end of their investigation in 2005, to which 79 more were added by November 2007. Given the average number of victims a year (between 20 and 35 approx.) in the six years since the last statistics were collected, 150 more may have become part of this unacceptable death list.

[3] Listing popular theories about who the killers were/are Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2003) mentions the following: "serial killers, satanic cults, Egyptian chemist 'mastermind' (arrested in 1995), Los Rebeldes (local gang arrested in 1996); Los Choferes (band of bus drivers arrested in 1999); corrupt Mexican police; well-protected sons of rich families, and drug cartels." As to why women are being murdered, she points to what may be some of the causes: "snuff films, organ harvesting, white slavery, the victims were leading double lives as prostitutes, the victims dressed like 'maqui-locas,' in short dresses and high heels that provoked their attackers; unemployed men are resentful of women getting jobs at the 'maquiladoras'."

[4] Recent novels on the Juárez murders written on both sides of the Atlantic include: Patrick Bard: *La frontière* (*La frontera*, 2002); Maud Tabachnik: *J'ai vu le diable en face* (*He visto al diablo de frente: Los crímenes de Ciudad* Juárez, 2005); Kama Gutier: *Ciudad Final* (2007); Stella Pope Duarte: *If I Die in Juárez* (2008); Sam Hawken: *The Dead Women of Juárez. Murder and Abduction in a Mexican Border Town* (2011). Among other works we can mention Teresa Rodríguez and Diana Montané with Lisa Pulitzer's nonfiction *The Daughters of Juárez. A True Story of Serial Murder South of the Border* (2007); and *Bordertown* [*Ciudad del silencio*], a 2006 film directed by Gregory Nava, starring Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas.

[5] *Making a Killing. Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba with Georgina Guzmán in 2010, is the most recent anthology on the Juárez murders that focuses on free trade. It is an ambitious, thorough work that includes a compilation of scholarly papers presented at the "Maquiladora Murders, Or, Who is Killing the Women of Juárez?" Conference that Gaspar de Alba organized in 2003 at UCLA, together with newer research published in feminist and social justice journals. It also includes *testimonios* and an afterword by Jane Caputi.

[6] One of the popular theories is that maquiladora bus drivers–collectively dubbed Los Choferes, one of whom nicknamed Dracula appears in *Desert Blood*—may have been responsible for at least some of the murders. Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* (2006) also plays with the idea of bus drivers being involved both in the actual rape and murder of women; they likewise kidnapped young females to be sexually abused and killed by men prominent in the Juárez economic realm.

[7] For more information on police corruption and the cartel of the Juárez police, see Diana Washington Valdez (2005), 117-41; and Marcos Fernández and Jean-Christophe Rampal (2008).

[8] "The snippets of fact that once in a great while percolate up through the Mexican press are ignored by the U.S. government and its citizens," says Charles Bowden (1996) about the U.S.'s lack of interest in what goes on in Ciudad Juárez.