

URBAN GEOGRAPHY PLENARY LECTURE—
FEMICIDE, MOTHER-ACTIVISM, AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF PROTEST
IN NORTHERN MEXICO¹

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“What has happened in Juárez resembles what is happening throughout Mexico. Courageous individuals speaking out against human rights violations and demanding thorough investigations into abuses are being targeted in an attempt to silence them.”

—Renata Rendón, Amnesty International USA's Advocacy Director
for the Americas (Amnesty International, 2007)

“Testimony, as every product in our culture, is often seen
as a commodity that must provide practical use.”

—Strejilevich (2006)

“This silence terrifies me,” said Esther Chávez, the director of a rape crisis center in Ciudad Juárez, the city that borders El Paso, Texas at the Mexico–U.S. divide.³ The silence she refers to is the quiet surrounding the ongoing violence against women in northern Mexico. “No one is protesting,” she said. “There are no press conferences. No marches. It's like we're back in 1993.” The year 1993 marks the beginning of what is widely recognized as northern Mexico's era of femicide (*feminicidio*)—the killing of women surrounded by impunity (Monárrez Fragoso, 2001). The year also marks the beginnings of the protests that made this violence famous around the world. As I listened to Esther, a woman in her mid-70s, while she lay on her sofa and prepared for another round of chemotherapy, I wondered if I should state the obvious. “You know, Esther,” I said, “no one, anywhere, protests violence against women on a regular basis.” “Well,” she said, “we used to.”

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³E. Chávez, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, April 2007, pers. comm.

Indeed, between 1995 and 2005, the northern Mexican cities of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City (both in the state of Chihuahua) were renowned for protests, led primarily by women, that shocked first the country and then much of the world with the news that women and girls were being kidnapped and murdered with impunity throughout the border region. For simplicity's sake, I refer to these protests and their protagonists as part of an "anti-femicide" movement or campaign.⁴ These protests took many forms and involved a variety of organizations and individuals who formed coalitions that spearheaded marches, press conferences, the creation of public monuments and memorials, artistic performances, building occupations, and confrontations with public officials, among other actions.

In recent years, however, the local anti-femicide coalitions have dissolved as groups part ways to work on separate projects or as they coordinate activities around issues other than "femicide."⁵ And with the disappearance of these local anti-femicide coalitions, there has been a quieting of the protests across the region. Unlike in previous years, the discoveries of female bodies are not followed by press conferences or other public actions that keep the violence on the front pages of local dailies. Indeed, local press coverage of the femicides has waned despite evidence of enduring violence against women, an escalation of violence more generally, and impunity for criminals across the board ("Desaparecen 124 personas en trece meses," 2007). Recent municipal and state-wide elections across the state of Chihuahua reveal that femicide, and how candidates address it, is no longer the campaign issue that it was from 1995–2004.

The dissolution of local coalitions and the quieting of public protest in northern Mexico, however, does not signify a lack of activism around femicide. Instead, it indicates a shift in the geographic orientation of the movement as activists from Mexico form coalitions with organizations and individuals in other countries to raise public awareness of the problems in their country. For instance, some activists and their organizations within northern Mexico have been working on cases on behalf of victims' families to present to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights under the Organization of American States;⁶ others are working with the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, a nonprofit organization that assists in the analysis of forensic data and the preparation of reports;⁷ others are trying to foster regional and international support for the preservation of the public monuments to the violence and its victims in northern Mexico;⁸ and others participate regularly in academic, political, and human rights events around the world.

⁴In other publications, I have referred to this movement as *Ni Una Mas*, a slogan meaning "Not One More," which has been used over the years as a campaign title for various anti-violence protests in northern Mexico. However, not all "anti-femicide" protests use this moniker, which emerged several years after activists had protested the violence under different slogans and campaign titles.

⁵The *Mesa de Mujeres* in Ciudad Juárez is an example of a newly formed coalition of activists involved in anti-femicide work but who are not addressing that issue exclusively in their joint work.

⁶Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa and La Asociación Nacional de Abogados Democráticos are two groups working on such cases.

⁷Alma Gomez of the organization *Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas* is working with the Argentine Forensic team and helped bring them to Mexico.

⁸The newly established group, "The Network Without Borders for Women's Life and Liberty," created at the "Femicide = Sanctioned Murder" conference held at Stanford University in May 2007, has coordinated a set of resolutions, including the protection of the monuments. Activists from a variety of organizations within and outside of Mexico attended this event.

While it is hard to place an actual number on such efforts, it seems clear to activists within the movement that as visibility of their activism has faded locally over the last few years, it has increased outside of the country.⁹

The movement's geographic shift toward the international arena reflects the impact of two principal processes on the anti-femicide movement.¹⁰ One is the strategy of activists within and beyond Mexico to generate international political pressure on Mexican politicians in order to seek justice for the victims and their families and to prevent further crimes. This strategy is especially important when activists are harassed or receive threats, as has been the case in the anti-femicide campaigns (Amnesty Internacional, 2003; Amnesty International, 2007). The other is a weakening in northern Mexico of the movement's coalitions, which are fragmented by political disagreements and competition for resources. In this paper, I investigate these two processes in relation to each other in order to ask how the quieting of this movement within Mexico is connected to its internationalization and what this holds for Mexico's democracy and for women's participation in it.

As a starting point, I take my cues from activists and scholars, primarily in Ciudad Juárez and in the state capital of Chihuahua City, who express concern over the divisions that have debilitated the coalitions within the domestic campaign.¹¹ In my experience within this movement, such divisions are palpable in marches, academic forums, and other public events. And as one scholar based in Ciudad Juárez put it, "The in-fighting makes all of this so hard."¹² In conversations with event participants, a variety of explanations describe the quarrels as based on a range of issues from politics, class and regional orientation to difficult personalities among key participants. While there is no single opinion as to why the movement has so many internal fissures, there is a commonly held view that, as one activist put it, "Working on local coalitions is not a good use of our energy right now."¹³ Or as another activist said, "We are working on our separate projects, and we are doing important things. But it does show that there are no strong [anti-femicide] coalitions here right now."¹⁴

Rather than regard such expressions of frustration as indicators of a "failed" movement within Mexico, I view them as part of the ongoing materialization of social movements out of the destruction of previous forms, as has been analyzed in the large literature

⁹I have arrived at this impression after talking with activists in Ciudad Juárez and in Chihuahua City from 2003 to the present.

¹⁰While much has been written on the limits to any particular set of categories, such as "movements" or "networks" or "coalitions," to describe the dynamic social relationships that connect activists across global and local scales (Nash, 2005), I see no way around using some of the terms and I do not have the time here to deconstruct their meaning for this movement, even though this issue is relevant to the topics I discuss. So, despite the pitfalls, I use the term "social movement" in addition to the concept of spatial alignments as explained in theories of networks (Latour, 1995) to refer to the anti-femicide protests.

¹¹I began investigating and participating in the anti-femicide protests in Ciudad Juárez in 1996 when I joined the faculty of the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ). I have lived and worked in Ciudad Juárez on and off since that time and just completed a visiting appointment at the UACJ as a Fulbright-García Robles Scholar for 2006–2007. Many of the observations here come from conversations with activists in northern Mexico and from participation in a variety of events over the years.

¹²Rosalba Robles, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, February 2004, pers. comm.

¹³Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, May 2004, pers. comm.

¹⁴Speaker Irma Campos, Director 8 de Marzo, Chihuahua City, Mexico, February 2007, pers. comm.

on social movements in Latin America (Alvarez et al., 1998; Nash, 2005). Therefore, I agree with those scholars who urge careful study of the infighting and divisions so common to social justice movements around the world. They argue that to treat these troubles as idiosyncratic or as inappropriate for public discussion leaves gaps in the literature on social movements, on networks, on collective action, and on the realities of social justice work in past and present times (Edelman, 2005). Indeed, as one scholar and anti-femicide activist has written, we must treat this movement as a “drama” full of “contradictions and constant transformation” (Rojas, 2006, p. 6). And so it is in this vein that I investigate how the dramas unfolding within the local coalitions in northern Mexico are connected to the production of international ones and to a geographic transformation of this movement. I do this primarily by focusing across scales, at the connections linking the faltering of the movement domestically to its production internationally and ask how does the former contribute to or limit the latter.

Toward this end, I find useful Cindi Katz’s elaboration of topography as a metaphor for tracing the dynamic alignments of social movements across scales that form around particular concepts (Katz, 2001). Her usage of contour line to refer to points of social contact reflects a Marxian allegiance to the idea that connections among people are based on social, rather than essential, relationships that incorporate spatial strategies for mediating these relationships. This thinking also finds common ground with network theory, but metaphors of networks and of cartography work slightly differently. Katz refers to contours lines as a means for integrating these spatial strategies into a conceptualization of the processes that mediate social relationships across space and through time. She writes:

My intent in invoking them is to imagine a politics that simultaneously retains the distinctness of the characteristics of a particular place and builds on its analytic connections to other places along “contour lines” marking, not elevation, but rather a particular relation to a process.... In this way, it is possible to theorize “the connectedness of vastly different places made artifactually discrete by virtue of history and geography but which also reproduce themselves differently amidst the common political–economic and sociocultural processes they experience.” (Katz, 2001, p. 721)

Instead of regarding this social movement in terms of people-to-people contacts, I use Katz’s formulation of contour lines to imagine the anti-femicide social movement as emerging through the various efforts of different actors as they engage with similar sets of issues. These efforts include positive as well as negative interactions as some people may prefer not to work directly with each other even as they seek justice around shared concerns.

The contour line that I identify and follow in this case as one that creates connection, including negative connections (or disconnections), within the anti-femicide movement is that of the “public woman.” By combining Marxist critiques of political economy with post-structuralist feminist interrogations of discursive production (particularly important are Scott, 1989; Butler, 1993; and Pratt, 2004), I investigate the discourse of the public woman as a technological device for producing the public woman as a material force of power that the anti-femicide activists must confront at every turn. And they do so via spatial strategies for configuring and reconfiguring their alliances in relation to her. In this

way, the public woman represents a contour line around which positive and negative connections form. She is a polarizing figure central to the movement, and I believe her to be key to the movement's current domestic problems as well as to its international successes.

PUBLIC WOMEN VERSUS RADICAL MOTHERS

In Mexico, the term "public woman" evokes the figure of a prostitute (*la puta*) who stands for the contaminated woman who contaminates all that she touches. The significance of "public woman" in Mexico's version of democracy is clear when contrasted to the concept of "public man" (*el hombre público*), which is one way of saying "citizen,"¹⁵ and it has been a powerful tool used by the governing elite to disparage women who work outside the home or who try to participate in the democratic process (Castillo, 1999; Wright, 2006b).

The significance of the public woman discourse for Ciudad Juárez, a city in which women represent a majority of the officially employed population, is readily evident. Since the inauguration of the maquiladora export-processing industries in the 1960s, women and girls have had to contend with widespread descriptions of themselves as "public women" who represent social trouble despite the regional economy's dependence on their income-generating activities (see also Castillo, 1999; Nathan, 1999). Such descriptions of female workers, so common to industrial cities since the 19th century, are hardly unique to this border city but they have extended to encompass women who participate in the public sector more broadly (Lamphere, 1987). For while Ciudad Juárez is most famous around the world for its feminization of the international division of labor and for the female sex workers who have long provided sexual services for men from both sides of the border, it is also well known within Mexico for women's participation in the democratization movement in the 1980s that eventually brought an end to the PRI's (Institutional Revolutionary Party) monopoly over the country's governance (Hernández Hernández, 2002). Consequently, in a city of women workers and women activists, the discourse that pervades the region today of public women as "social trouble" is a concept that links women who work outside the home to those who exercise democratic rights around the idea of their intrinsic contamination.

In the following, I organize the discussion of anti-femicide protests around two periods that reflect different strategies that activists use for dealing with the power of the "public woman" discourse in contemporary Mexico. I refer to the first period as defined by "a politics of rights" and the second by "a politics of mother-activism." The politics of rights represents the beginning years of the anti-femicide protest in the 1990s, when its leading activists created a coalition to change the meaning of "public woman" by focusing on an expansion of women's rights to the city and its governance. They fought the blame-the-victim strategy that political and corporate elites used to dismiss the crimes as problems created by women on the street. And their politics of rights incorporated many of the demands of the rights-based movements that had shaken up Mexico and much of Latin America at the time. Many of the leaders of this early phase of the anti-femicide campaign had years of experience in the democratization, women's rights, and agrarian

¹⁵I would like to thank Soccoro Tabuenca for pointing out this linguistic contrast to me.

movements within and beyond northern Mexico. Their organizational experience provided the initial infrastructure for helping the families and friends of victims publicize their concerns and gain access to political and economic leaders. But as I detail below, the public woman discourse provided the principal means used by governing elites to attack this politics of rights and cause its dissolution by the early 2000s. And this destruction created the conditions for the production of a second period of anti-femicide campaigning around what I call a “politics of mother-activism.”

The movement’s “politics of mother-activism” reflects a realignment of the previous coalitions largely in response to a vicious assault on the movement by governing elites who used the public woman discourse to demonize its leaders. While victims’ family members always have been leading forces in the anti-femicide protests,¹⁶ the organization of the movement around the idea of the mother-activist as the central protagonist took hold after 2001. This strategy reveals another way of fighting against the public woman discourse as the mother-activist in this context represents the woman who, motivated by her private experience as a mother, trespasses into the public sphere, not as a public woman but as a private one whose presence on the street indicates that something is terribly wrong in northern Mexico.

Mother-activist movements gained momentum across Latin America in the 1970s as a strategy for seeking justice in repressive political climates. As numerous other studies have shown, women who present themselves as “mother-activists” assume many and varied roles, often as leaders and key strategists, within social movements that also vary depending on the context and activist goals (Taylor, 1997; Bejarano, 2002; Bouvard, 2002; Bosco, 2004, 2006). But despite the diversity among them and their activism, mother-activists share something in common in their proclamation that their politics originates in their experiences as mothers. Their public life on the street, in short, always begins with their private one in the family. This point of origin is fundamental to mother-activism and its strategy for diffusing political hostility to its actions. It is an activism that plays upon the patriarchal concept of matronly woman as inherently *apolitical*—or as the opposite of virile male subversives—to present the image of mothers as “nonthreatening” to governing elites even as their demands often challenge the basic foundations of state and economy (Taylor, 1997; Scott, 2002). For this reason, I refer to them as “conservative radicals,” as they couch radical demands within the conservative demeanor of women defined as mothers within a patriarchal context that demands female obligation to the male-headed, domestic realm (see also Neuman, 2004; Craske, 2005). That they have no counterpart in the figure of “father-activists” only further demonstrates the gendered dimensions of the conservative logic that girds mother-activism in the idea that mothers belong at home while men, be they fathers or otherwise, have full access as “public men” to all domains of political economy.

Just as in other mother-activist movements, this conservative radicalism of the anti-femicide movement finds expression as the mothers demand the return their children and an end to the impunity of the criminals. The apparent simplicity of this demand of a mother for her child and of redress for those who have injured this child is, of course,

¹⁶The first formally organized family organization, *Voces Sin Eco*, emerged in 1998 out of the coordinated efforts of family members, some of whom had been actively protesting and challenging governing elites for some years. The group disbanded in 2001.

radical when presented against the state that is either protecting or not pursuing the criminals and in a context where the child is known to be, or is assumed to be, dead. As such, the mothers demand the impossible both in a physical sense (i.e., the return to life of a dead child) as well as in the political sense (i.e., the end of impunity in a corrupt political system, for which Mexico is still famous). For this reason, other scholars have described mother-activists as engaged in an “eternal struggle,” one that can never be fulfilled and that therefore can be quite dangerous to the status quo (Alvarez et al., 1998). The power of the mother’s appeal lies within the conservatism of her request and the promise that follows. In exchange for her child and for the disciplining of those who have injured her, the mothers will return home where they belong. They are not, like public women, forsaking their definition as women beholden to the domestic sphere. Indeed, their politics rests on a plea for the government to create the conditions by which they can return home. Thus, it is their presence on the street that exposes the social perversion, not because the mothers are socially perverse but because the situation has forced them, against the natural order of things, to leave their homes. In this way, the mothers articulate that their politics is a reaction to a state that neither protects nor holds sacred the patriarchal family but instead creates conditions that force women to leave their homes and look for their children. Such conservative radicalism has proven to be extremely forceful in the socially conservative contexts of many Latin American countries, particularly from the 1970s to the 1990s (Taylor, 1997). In this way, mother-activists use the idea of the patriarchally defined mother—the woman whose duties and sexuality are bound within the home—in order to neutralize hostility against their activism and to protect them from charges that they are either political subversives or “public women” who threaten the foundations of family, nation and society (Scott, 2002; Neuman, 2004).

But despite the disavowal of being “public women,” the mother-activist approach has been the most successful for publicizing the anti-femicide movement beyond Mexico and generating protests internationally. And yet, as I endeavor to show in the following, this activism would not be possible in the anti-femicide campaign without the previous round of activism organized by those who proclaimed their rights as public women in the public sphere. Tracing the contour line of the public woman reveals the intimacy binding these two periods while it sheds light onto many of the tensions that currently tear at the movement’s social fabric.

BACKGROUND

In the early 1990s, when families and friends of victims began calling attention to the violence that had claimed their loved ones, they found their initial support among organizations and individuals whose own activism originated as responses to economic and political stresses of the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁷ In Mexico’s border cities, neoliberal restructuring

¹⁷Through the 1970s, it was extremely difficult to form civic organizations independent of the authoritarian PRI party whose governing apparatus depended on a politics of cooptation. Most efforts to resist organizations independent of PRI met with hostility if not violent repression. A series of events beginning with Vatican II and pro-democracy campaigns in the 1960s, trade unionism in the 1970s along with a radical urban guerrilla movement in the north, the economic crisis of the 1980s, and the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City, forced the PRI to loosen its grip on civic organizations.

had begun in the 1970s (a decade earlier than its official 1982 date) with the inauguration of the maquiladora export-processing factories as the region's economic and social development model. Ciudad Juárez, particularly, had been the test-case for organizing social and economic development around the private sector and export-processing. During Mexico's strong economic growth in the 1970s, Ciudad Juárez was already showing evidence of social distress as thousands upon thousands of internal migrants, most fleeing extreme rural poverty, chased dreams of a better life across the border in the United States or in the maquiladoras of Mexican border cities. Ciudad Juárez was the principal destination of the female migrants, who made the city famous for its "feminization of the international division of labor" and whose enthusiasm for accepting poverty level wages for long, grueling factory shifts revealed their economic desperation.

Additionally, political liberalization and fraud-free elections occurred earlier in northern Mexico than in the rest of the country that was still in the grips of the governing PRI party that had ruled the country since 1929. By 1982, a democratization movement was well under way in Ciudad Juárez, where the socially conservative PAN (National Action Party) won the mayoral race in the city that year and laid the groundwork for capturing the state governorship ten years later. Even as many civic organizations in Ciudad Juárez supported the democratization represented by the PAN's victory, they faced a further entrenchment of neoliberal ideologies as the PAN leadership advocated for even more extreme market-driven social reform than the PRI.¹⁸ To boot, the PAN added a strong dose of social conservatism focused on an orthodox Catholic definition of family values that called for a return of the patriarchal family and included a strong critique of the women who filled the streets, factories, and nightclubs of Ciudad Juárez. And in 1992, the PRI and PAN legislators in the Chihuahua state congress passed a law in 1992 defining abortion as a capital offense.

Within this climate, the organizations that emerged in Ciudad Juárez and in Chihuahua City were dealing with a malicious combination of the politics of production, built around the maquiladora export-processing model that sought low-waged female labor, with a politics of reproduction that stigmatized those same women and girls for working outside the home and denied them basic services. Thus, while governing elites boasted of the city's low-waged women workers who did good quality work, they simultaneously blamed these very women for working outside the home and refused to seek solutions for the lack of daycare, educational and medical facilities, secure housing, dependable public transportation, and services for domestic abuse and gendered violence. By the mid-1980s, more than a quarter of the city's population lived without potable water and other city services; brutality against women was on the rise and their children were increasingly entering the ranks of a growing drug economy. In response to such troubles, Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City both saw, in the 1980s, a proliferation of organizations that focused on the needs of marginalized communities, single-headed families, pro-democratization, and legal aid even though the country did not have a donor base to support their activities.¹⁹

¹⁸This sort of paradox was not experienced on a national level until the PAN's federal victory in 2000.

Such was the political economic context surrounding the initial call to organize against the femicide in 1993 when Esther Chávez, a retired accountant from Kraft foods and editorialist in a Ciudad Juárez daily, and Judith Galarza, a human rights activist whose sister had been disappeared during the 1970s dirty war, issued an alarm to civic leaders: according to their count, some forty women and girls had been savagely murdered in the border city.²⁰ Victims' families had already been protesting but were not receiving adequate attention from the media or public officials and it was clear to Chávez and Galarza that they needed institutional support from the city's civic organizations. Chávez described their first attempt at organizing a protest this way: "We knew we had to do something, so we went to the mayor's office. And we got there and said, well, what do we do? And then we said, well, we're occupying the office! Isn't that what you do? And when the press came, they said, 'Who are you?' We didn't even have a name."²¹

Within a few weeks, they came up with a name: The Coalition of NGOs for Women's Rights (*La Coordinadora de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales en Pro de la Mujer*), which I will call "The Coalition." The Coalition initially consisted of some eight organizations based in Ciudad Juárez (but some with shared networks in Chihuahua City), later growing to fourteen (Pérez García, 1999). The participating organizations had a variety of missions ranging from community health and education to domestic violence and economic development. With the creation of the Coalition in 1994 was born a new women's rights movement that took the idea of anti-femicide as its central concern.

THE POLITICS OF RIGHTS

The Coalition quickly enacted a five-point mission statement to attack practices and beliefs within political economy and cultural institutions that justified violence against women and denied women the resources to fight it. Toward meeting their goals, they organized protests and marches and occupations of public buildings. They helped the families find a public audience for their frustration with the police and for their pain, and they moved these stories of femicide from the back to the front pages of the Chihuahua and, then, the Mexican newspapers.

These protests caught regional political and corporate elites off-guard when the violence that they had complacently ignored was becoming the biggest story of the border. By 1998, the *New York Times*, CNN, and other international news sources, in addition to Mexico's major newspapers, had declared to the world that Ciudad Juárez was not only a place for factory work and free trade but it was also a place to murder young women with impunity (Deutsche-Pressre Agentur, 1997; CNN Today, 1998; Dillon, 1998). And this

¹⁹The practice of anonymous donation is still uncommon in Mexico and organizations have few domestic options, besides government sources, for raising funds. An unreliable mail system and lack of check-usage in the country mean that organizations do not launch mailing campaigns. And until the principal government funder, INDESOL, was founded in 1992, government support of independent NGOs was largely unsystematic (CEMEFI, 2002, Mexico DF).

²⁰Maria Elena Vargas, who had been a founding member of the feminist organization, *8 de Marzo*, in Chihuahua City, was also key in these early days for creating the original "list" of names that was used to demonstrate that a crime-wave against women was in effect.

²¹Esther Chávez, January 2007, pers. comm.

attention was drawing connections between the murders and the insecure lives of the young factory women who worked in facilities bearing such household names as GM, Philips, Hoover, RCA, GE, and others. News stories showed how factory women had to brave dark and mean streets either on their way to work in the first shift or on their way home from the second, as they struggled to support themselves and their families on poverty wages (Dillon, 1998).

All of this international attention meant that the Coalition was making progress toward its goal of changing a regional political economy that presented women as disposable and docile. For the Coalition was not only bringing attention to the ugly underbelly of industrial capitalism and neoliberal economic reform that combined inadequate wages with reduced public expenditures. It was also shattering a longstanding promise that regional elites had used to attract international business to the border city. The promise was that the region had an inexhaustible supply of “docile” women who put up and shut up with the best of them (Fernández-Kelly, 1983; Salzinger, 2003; Wright, 2006a). Suddenly, Ciudad Juárez was erupting with loud and boisterous women who were marching, yelling at public officials, blocking international bridges, painting telephone poles, protesting at factories and, basically, raising hell.

Indeed, the Coalition’s public acumen had forced federal and state officials to recognize the importance of their protest. In 1994, the state government appointed a special prosecutor to investigate the murders and established an office in Ciudad Juárez to handle the crimes. The Coalition met with the governor, the mayor, and federal officials and, through the 1990s, candidates running for Ciudad Juárez and statewide offices had to explain their views regarding the violence against women along the border.

But as the Coalition made strides toward challenging the concept of women’s disposability and docility, regional corporate and political elites struck back with a vengeance. And they used the most powerful weapon they had in their arsenal: the discourse of the public woman. Through the mid-1990s, they targeted this discourse principally at the girls and women who had been murdered and/or kidnapped. By characterizing the victims as public women who behaved like “whores,” regional elites attempted to dismiss the victims’ legitimacy as “innocent victims” on the basis that they had invited their own suffering and were therefore responsible for the crimes perpetrated against them. Thus, by resorting to the age-old blame-the-victim strategy, still so common around the world for dismissing violence against women, political and corporate leaders attempted to privatize the problem (Monárrez Fragoso, 2001; Tabuenca, 2003). The issue, they said, was a crisis of the patriarchal family as revealed by the presence of women on the streets at all hours of the day. Thus, according to such logic, the solution lay not with the state but with a reassertion of firm patriarchal domestication of mothers, daughters and sisters.

The Coalition skillfully fought this discursive attack with two principal strategies. One was to personalize the victims as a way to defeat official efforts to lump all victims into a catchall category of “worthless whores.” Their second approach was to portray the victims as “daughters” (*hijas*), whose activities on the street were dictated by their obligations within the home. This strategy for representing victims as children had already proven effective throughout Latin America as a means of fighting the dirty wars of numerous countries, where activists had to combat the idea that the victims of state-sanctioned violence were “communists” and “terrorists” or other such social troublemakers who deserved, or even caused, the brutality that ended their lives. In Ciudad

Juárez, this dirty-war rhetoric, still well-remembered in northern Mexico where numerous activists in the 1970s were disappeared or murdered by government forces, was now being applied to the femicide victims. By portraying the victims as public women, the governing elites alleged that they were a kind of cultural terrorist who bred the social terror of women loose on the streets, free to destroy the patriarchal basis of family and nation (Wright, 2006b).

Yet, by using a discursive strategy of presenting the victims of violence as “children,” the anti-femicide activists turned the governing elites’ social conservatism on its head, again as has been common throughout Latin America since the 1960s. In this case, the Coalition was able to present victims as children (i.e., daughters) due in part to the way that the maquiladora model of development had been sold to the Mexican public. In the 1960s and 1970s, maquiladora proponents had justified the hiring of young women in factories on the basis that they would apply the “natural” female traits of female servitude, docility and dexterity to income-generating activities, and thereby reinforce their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters (Fernández-Kelly, 1983; Salzinger, 2003). In other words, the proponents of the maquiladora model argued that factory girls would not turn into public women. Instead, the factory would serve as an extension of the patriarchal home, where patriarchal managers would oversee the continued obedience and docility of factory daughters (Wright, 2006a).

The Coalition used this same logic in the 1990s to explain how the victims of violence were these very daughters whose familial obligations compelled them to walk the streets en route to their factory jobs. This discourse proved extremely popular in the foreign, particularly the U.S. press, as the debates on NAFTA in the mid-1990s had introduced the maquiladoras into the U.S.-American imaginary. And the portrayal of the victims as “innocent daughters,” above other possible identities, took hold in the domestic and international press. The occasional reference to victims as *señoritas* also reinforced the innocent daughter identity, as within the patriarchal traditions of conservative Mexican families *señoritas* are unwed and virginal daughters whose status will change when they leave their fathers home for their husbands and become *señoras* (Nathan, 2002).

Consequently, the Coalition’s discursive strategy served many purposes. It tapped into the powerful discourse of “children” that denied the government its discourse of “terrorist” by diverting the condemning connotations of public women. It also allowed the Coalition to make a link between the violence and the neoliberal political economic policies that both exploited “factory daughters” as well as left them unprotected. On the basis of these discursive connections, the Coalition organized a movement to demand better pay, better transportation, better housing, more respect, and more safety for the factory daughters of northern Mexico (Pérez García, 1999). As such, the Coalition turned the discourse of factory daughters into a tool for declaring the rights of women to be on Ciudad Juárez streets and who deserved protection as full participants in the region’s political economy. And within a year’s time, the elite had clearly lost the battle over the discursive production of the victims. Not only had the Coalition demonstrated the victims’ innocence but they also had used the elite’s own representations of female workers as “daughters” as the means for creating the most significant women’s rights movement in the region’s history.

But as the scholar Joan Scott (1997) cautions, women’s rights movements are nothing if not contradictory. The strategy of turning victims into daughters provided the governing

elites with a powerful counter-strategy, again traceable along the contour line of the public woman. As they were losing the battle over the discursive production of the victims, the governing elites used the public woman discourse against the activists when they asked: If the victims were innocent daughters rather than public women guilty of their own crimes, as the activists argued, then who was authorized to search for them? Motherhood thus became the standard for determining the legitimacy of the women who were fighting for the daughters of northern Mexico and any non-mother was fair game for being exposed as a dangerous “public woman.”

This strategy for attacking the Coalition exploded in late 1999 and early 2000 with an accusation that the non-family activists in the Coalition were manipulating the victims’ families for their personal gain (Pérez García, 1999; Wright, 2006b). This discursive attack proved to be very powerful not only against the Coalition but also against its constituent organizations that had been critical of the federal and state governments in previous years. For it not only took aim at the activists for being women on the street; it also turned their ability to fundraise, particularly internationally, into a liability. Indeed, the more successful the organizations had been in raising funds for their programs from international donors, the more vulnerable they were to the attack that they were “profiting” from the manipulation of families and the selling of their pain to an international market that was always looking for a juicy story of sex and violence along the border. As a result, governing elites succeeded in portraying the Coalition as a bunch of public women who were prostituting not just families but also Mexico to an international market that sullied the country’s reputation.²² The first principal target of such attacks was the childless and unmarried Esther Chávez, who was vilified for her public activities in a series of attacks over several months in the local daily, *El Norte*, in 2000. “We couldn’t even support her,” one former member of the Coalition told me in December 2006. “We didn’t want to get burned with her.”

The power of the public woman discourse as a weapon against the anti-femicide movement was perhaps made even more apparent in the years following the terrible discovery in November 2001 of eight female corpses, all showing torture and mutilation, in central Ciudad Juárez. The bodies were found directly across from the headquarters of the maquiladora association and down the street from Walmart. This event galvanized a massive response from all social sectors across the state, and they were joined by domestic and international organizations in a quickly organized march, called Exodus for Life, that occurred in March 2002. While the organizers of the march were leaders of the NGOs in Chihuahua City, along with some victims’ families, they showed that the lessons of the assault on public women had been well learned. When they marched across the 370 kilometers of Chihuahuan desert, they created an image of the “domestic woman in mourning” to express their political opposition to the state government that was doing nothing about the violence (Wright, 2006a). The press referred to these women as *Las Mujeres de Negro* (Women in Black).²³

²²And the elites blamed the Coalition and its supporters for the economic downturn in the late 1990s, when in response to the U.S. recession and competitive prospects in China, Ciudad Juárez began to see a net loss of maquiladora jobs as industries closed or relocated operations (Wright, 2006a).

²³The *Mujeres de Negro* are not directly affiliated with other Women in Black organizations.

Upon their arrival in Ciudad Juárez, the marchers were met by thousands of protestors, and they walked through the city, together, en route to one of the international bridges where they erected a cross adorned with nails, torn clothing, mannequin parts, and photographs as grisly reminders of the savagery that ended the victims' lives. But while the event was orchestrated by a variety of women-led civic organizations with diverse goals, the groups that came forward in the following weeks as the leading anti-femicide movement's organizations were those that claimed a basis in victims' families and, particularly, in their mothers.²⁴ Two of the most prominent family organizations emerged out of this period: *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Ciudad Juárez) and *Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas* (Chihuahua city). A third mothers' organization was created soon thereafter by the Chihuahua state government to present another version of mother activism.

By 2003, the mother-activists and their organizations were traveling nationally and internationally to bring attention to the violence. Yet the various organizations remained distinct, reflecting different political approaches to mother-activism and different conceptualizations of justice in relationship to it. The organization *Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas* (Justice for Our Daughters), based in Chihuahua City, has focused most directly on the state government and its responsibility in relation to the crimes. Some of the organization's members are active in the legal aid organization that helped give rise to *Mujeres de Negro*, and they have recently formed the Center for Women's Human Rights (*Centro de Derechos Humanos Para las Mujeres*) in Chihuahua City, which, among other activities, works directly on specific legal reforms to create better protections for women and their families in marginal communities. While the family organization is independent of these other NGOs, this concentration on formulating demands and change at the level of the Chihuahua state government (which is responsible for homicide investigations and prosecutions) reveals cross-fertilization among the legal aid and family organizations.

The Ciudad Juárez group, *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (We Want our Daughters Home), is independent of any other Mexican organization and is the most internationally visible. Its members have traveled internationally giving talks, participating in documentaries, and speaking before the United Nations, Amnesty International, and international human rights commissions. While its members have met with state and federal officials, the organization does not focus as much as does the Chihuahua-based group on statewide judicial reform. Rather, its emphasis has been more on generating international pressure on the federal government as well as organizing workshops and therapy for the victims' families. The mothers organized via the government entity, "Chihuahua Institute for the Woman" (*Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer*), are less involved in political activism

²⁴The roots of the *Mujeres de Negro* were in feminist, rural legal aid, anti-privatization, and pro-democracy groups. Two of its leaders had served in statewide office and many of the women were known for their activism in public politics. But immediately, the *Mujeres de Negro* was vilified by the governing and other regional elites for prostituting family pain for their own political and economic gain (Piñon Balderrama, 2003). And so while the *Mujeres de Negro* still organized events and presented a public image of female domesticity and mourning, the group's leaders spoke through the family-based organization, *Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas*, when articulating their demands for public accountability and an end to the violence.

than are the other two groups, and focus more on the immediate victims' mothers and their families.²⁵

While clearly distinct from one another, the different family organizations share a common explanation for the origins of their mother activism within the mothers' experience of loss. Unlike the organizations of the Coalition, they are made up of private women. And while this explanation presents a shield against accusations that they are troublesome public women, it has not laid a foundation for creating strong coalitions among the organizations. Indeed, the divisiveness around the public woman that wrought the demise of the Coalition has continued to plague efforts to create coalitions among the family organizations. As one early leader in the anti-femicide campaign announced in a 2003 Chihuahua newspaper: "There are pseudo-organizations and pseudo-leaders who benefit (*lucran*) not only politically, but also with the donations that they receive in bank accounts in the name of women assassinated in Ciudad Juárez. The time has come to identify a difference [between the public and private women] in order to clean up the image of the NGOs" (Meza Rivera, 2003, p. 2).

The discourse of the public woman is once again front and center as tensions fly over whether family organizations should work with non-family ones, how to use donated funds, whether domestic violence counts as femicide, and whether the mothers should be confrontational with public officials, among other sorts of issues. The most common way to voice such debates has been through a discourse of who represents the "real" victims' mothers versus who has "sold out" to or been manipulated by the public women activist organizations.

These tensions rose to widespread attention in the days preceding an international protest organized by groups within and outside of Mexico to take place in Ciudad Juárez on February 14, 2004. A group of NGOs within Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City, including family and non-family groups, had coordinated with regional and international organizations such as Amnesty International and Eve Ensler's V-Day Foundation to organize several events, including a performance of the "Vagina Monologues," a march across the international bridge between Mexico and the U.S. (where Ciudad Juárez and El Paso meet), and speeches from high-profile Mexican and U.S. celebrities. In the weeks leading to the event, however, the mothers associated with the Chihuahua Institute for the Woman criticized some of the principal organizers for "profiting from the memory of their daughters" (Chaparro, 2004, p. 5B). Targeted in the attacks were the *Mujeres de Negro* and Esther Chávez, who were accused of "not being capable of understanding the pain that the mothers feel from their losses" (*ibid.*). But the recriminations were also directed at mothers associated with the Ciudad Juárez organization, *Nuestra Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, whose co-director had to defend the fiscal activities of her organization against the claims that it also was "profiting" from the deaths. In this context, to be guilty of such "profiting" was to be discredited as a "public woman" who was, essentially, "prostituting" the pain of the families in the public market (e.g., Guerrero and Minjáles, 2004).

²⁵At the time of this writing, many of the mothers who worked through this institute had left the organization along with its first director, Victoria Caraveo, who also was the founder of the organization *Mujeres Por Juárez*, a group with its origins in the protests against the high tariffs charged by utility companies.

However, in those same days, similar accusations had been made by *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* as it publicly broke ranks with the February 14 coordinators and declared that the family organization would be holding an alternative event in Ciudad Juárez simultaneously to the originally planned one. The organization explained its complaint with the event organizers in an on-line posting in which it criticized the other local activists for yielding to the pressures of women's rights activists in the United States, who were concerned with domestic violence and sexual taboos, who engaged in inappropriate fundraising events that took advantage of the mothers, and who excluded the legitimate mothers from the planning of the event (*Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, 2004). The accusations were, in other words, that the event had been taken over by "public women" who were furthering their feminist agenda for women's rights at the expense of the mothers' concerns for their children.

These claims were disputed by the event organizers but the impasse was never resolved and, on the day of the event, the mother-activists parted ways (for an insightful analysis of this day and the many complex relationships at play in the V-Day event, see Rojas, 2005). The Ciudad Juárez mothers' group held its activities in one part of the city, the Chihuahua City organization participated in the originally scheduled protest in another part of the city, and the mothers working with the Chihuahua Institute for Women left town altogether and embarked on a week-long government-sponsored trip to Mexico City. Participants from within and outside of Mexico who wanted to support the anti-femicide cause had to choose between the simultaneous events. Some tried to support both efforts and many talked of the confusion and despair caused by the public divide that exposed deep rifts within the anti-femicide movement.²⁶ As one activist put it to me during the February 14 activities, "This is the beginning of *another* end" to the anti-femicide movement in the region. While other protests have occurred since then, none have attempted to recreate the breadth of coalitions and events envisioned by the V-Day planners.

But to appreciate fully the meaning of these divisions among the mother-activists, their corresponding organizations, and the other anti-femicide protestors, we must push the analysis a step further into an examination of how the public woman discourse as used by activists within the movement has a different emphasis than that used by the governing elites. While the latter used the discourse as a means for silencing protestors, the activists used it as a means for bringing attention to the exploitation of labor that they endure as participants in the nonprofit sector of global capitalism. So although the reaffirmation of the virtuous private woman (versus the antithetical public version) still holds within the activists' use of the discourse, the mother-activists articulate a radical dimension not intended by the elites as they voice a critique of capitalist exploitation from a "mothers'" point of view. And this critique has much to do with the tensions emerging in northern Mexico in relation to the success of the movement internationally.

THE LABOR OF MOTHER-ACTIVISM

To see this critique within the mother-activist use of the public woman discourse, we must begin with the labor of mother activism. The making of a story out of one's pain,

²⁶As a participant in these events, I spoke with many who expressed dismay over these divisions.

loss, and anger is a labor-intensive endeavor that requires mental and sometimes physical strength, preparation, and the willingness to perform publicly. In the anti-femicide campaign, the mother-activists work hard to produce their testimonies and make them accessible. Some have traveled nationally and internationally and have spoken at a wide variety of events. Many have talked of the exhaustion they experience and how difficult it can be to tell their personal stories in front of a crowd. Many must overcome fear of speaking in public and adapt to unfamiliar surroundings to perform their testimony. In other words, their performances require the time, dedication, and energy that fit within the category of activities commonly known as “work,” as they transform their emotions as mothers who have lost a child into a public rendition of a story recognized as “testimony.”

In this usage, testimony does not refer to its legal definition of providing evidence under oath but to the meaning of *testimonio*, the Spanish term developed as a human rights instrument during Latin America’s dirty wars of the 20th century (Yudice, 1991). In such contexts, testimony is a first person account of a human rights violation that has been sanctioned by the state; hence, the testifier is not providing testimony in a state-sponsored court of law but in the realm of public opinion as a way to foment moral outrage over state-sponsored abuses.²⁷ Testimony is simultaneously the assertion of a personal and collective identity. Its power derives from its first-person narrative structure based on the authenticity of personal experience but its *significance* lies in its claims that the personal represents a collective experience (Yudice, 1991; Strejilevich, 2006). Testimony, as one Argentinian activist/author/torture survivor has written, communicates the “intimate, subjective, deep dimension of horror” (Strejilevich, 2006, p. 701) that one person feels on behalf of many. With this understanding, testimonial speech is a description of events whose veracity lies in the personal experience of the testifier. For example, in her famous testimonial, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, Menchu describes her story of torture and atrocity at the hands of the Guatemalan military, which stands as a collective experience for millions of indigenous peoples who have suffered state-sanctioned violence around the world. Her testimony later became a source of controversy when others challenged her first-person experience of the atrocities she described (Schwartz, 1998). At issue in the controversy was not whether the human rights violations had occurred but whether they had *occurred to her*. Testimony stakes its validity on this question. For this reason, it is critical that the strategy of mother-activism be based on the testimony of those who have actually lost daughters to the violence that counts as femicide. Their loss in Mexico speaks to the loss of other mothers in other places at other times, whose children have been murdered by assassins protected by a corrupt state. So while others may know their stories, under the terms of *testimonio* no one else may tell them. Only the mothers can lay claims to representing this larger collectivity.

The practice of mother-activist testimony within the anti-femicide movement reinforces this idea as it tends to flow through emotional renderings of the experiences that connect mother-activists to an audience around the idea of a human rather than political connection. Certainly, this is a prominent message within the anti-femicide campaign, as mother-activists talk of their daughters and of their anguish and outrage over the

²⁷In Latin America, testimony has been a significant way for women to represent their own experience in political and cultural contexts.

treatment of their children and over the government's indifference to the brutal crimes. These testimonies frequently unfold through expressions of anger along with intense sadness and tears to which the audience almost always visibly responds in kind, their anger palpable and tears flowing. The emotional experience reinforces the mother-activists' assertions that their motivations lie not in the political realm but in their experience as mothers.

But since the mother-activists are the only ones who can provide the testimony based on events that they have experienced and since mother-activism relies on the emotional force of their testimonies, the mothers must constantly tell and re-tell their stories. As they do so, they provide a steady reassurance that the politics with which they are engaged are those that transcend politics because they originate in the fundamental human connection of a mother to her child. Their demands for the return of their children, for an end to corruption, and for an end to impunity are radical in northern Mexico today. Such demands question the legitimacy of the state that does not protect its citizens or its families and that does not bring criminals to justice. But the mothers cloak their radicalism within their promise to return home once the violence, the impunity, and the corruption end. In this way, the mothers are telling a story that has been told many times before by mother-activists in parts of Mexico, Argentina, El Salvador, Chile, and other places over the decades. Their stories, in other words, are already well-known, as they seek radical changes while promising not to become radical themselves (Taylor, 1997; Craske, 2005; Snyder, 2006). Indeed, the familiarity of this message is borne of its repetition, which underscores the mother-activist's iconic status as a figure who represents a collective of mothers past and present who take to the streets to protect their children.

And, in this way, the mother-activists' stories fulfill another requirement of *testimonio*: their stories follow a "systemizing" structure that signifies the genre of mother-activism (Strejilevich, 2006). While the details of the terrible events vary from one mother to the next, the audience that hears their stories recognizes the basic structure of the story. The stories may be shocking in the awful details that they entail but they are rarely surprising, as mothers describe their grief, their anger, and their subsequent political activism as natural outcomes of the most natural relationship of a mother to her child, something that is recognizable around the world as fundamental to human societies. Consequently, as the mother-activists follow the basic contours of mother testimonial speech, they fulfill the audience's expectations for what this kind of speech entails (Strejilevich, 2006). They have liberty with the details but not with the general outline of their story that must fulfill the expectation that their political activism derives from their experience as mother. It is not a story that questions the meaning of motherhood but instead one that reaffirms it as a fundamental and transparent relationship that transcends political and other social differences and that links mother-activists in one part of the world to those in another. Accordingly, their stories are familiar not because these particular mothers have told them before but because other mothers in other places have told similar stories as part of their activism.

In this way, the mother-activists demonstrate how testimonies, as an author in *Human Rights Quarterly* recently put it, resemble a commodity that "provides practical use" (Strejilevich, 2006, p. 703), as mother-activists generate audiences who are already familiar with the stories that they are going to tell. It is the familiarity of these stories that underscores their popularity. As one activist in Ciudad Juárez said, "The mothers tell the

same stories because that's what the audience wants to hear, even though they have heard it before."²⁸ The mothers tell their stories that have already been heard as a means for generating an audience that can hear this testimony and react by supporting the movement with human and material resources. Such resources arise from the networks of social activism that link local and global organizations and individuals within the general contours of social movement funding, where organizations with access to donor bases (usually in the "First World/Global North") and to the tax-deductible structures that facilitate fundraising, turn themselves into the funders of causes in those places (often called the "Third World/Global South") lacking the capital base and the requisite tax benefits (see also Ghimire, 2006; Morena, 2006; Vincent, 2006). By appealing to an international audience, mother-activists are also helping to create those connections for channeling donations from one part of the world to another. And to make these connections, mother-activists must impress on their audience not only the worthiness of the cause in and of itself but also its worthiness in relation to other causes that also desperately need the funding. For those tax-deductible donations that gird donor giving around the world are, like any capital resource, scarce, and competition for them can be fierce (Ghimire, 2006; Morena, 2006; Vincent, 2006).

Social justice causes exist in the nonprofit domain of global capitalism and are not immune to the requirements for competition that apply to any social entity within the system (Joseph, 2002). Consequently, the mothers' repetition of testimony is, to borrow from Judith Butler, a "productive act" for producing a cause that can compete in the international market of human rights causes. The repetition of their stories is not merely to "inform" but also to "produce" mother-activists as the anti-femicide movement's symbol or, to use Jean Baudrillard (2001), as its "commodity-sign." They give the movement its brand name. Or as an activist and scholar in Ciudad Juárez put it, "The mothers sell this cause."²⁹

Consequently, the mother-activist strategy requires a constant supply of mothers who are willing to do the work of mother-activism and compete for resources. So, while many of the mother-activists in the movement assume a variety of roles across organizations (not only in the mother-activist ones), when they present their testimony, they must constantly reproduce themselves as "mothers" above any other possible identity. In effect, they must continually work to put their testimony into circulation and make the connections between their individual experience and that of a larger collectivity so as to reproduce the brand of mother-activism that sets their cause apart from others.

But since testimony circulates only if it is heard, creating an audience for mother-activists is as crucial as the act of testifying (Yudice, 1991). This work of audience creation includes the labor of numerous activists, including but certainly not limited to those who identify themselves as "mother-activists." In other words, victims' mothers, their supporting organizations, and all of the other individuals and organizations that have participated in the anti-femicide movement and who make it possible for mother-activism to circulate as a practical commodity through the international circuits of social justice campaigns are working in a labor process required for producing and selling their cause.

²⁸Rosalba Robles, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, January 2007, pers. comm.

²⁹Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, March 2004, pers. comm.

But as Marx demonstrates, the social relations of labor also include all of the labor embodied in the technology and other entities required for the organization of any particular labor process. With this analysis, he demonstrates how labor processes are built on relations that bind workers from different places in time.

The labor process within the anti-femicide movement is no different. Indeed, by using the discursive analysis of post-structuralism, we can see how the previous battles over the identification of victims as either “worthless whores” or “innocent daughters” represent part of this labor process. Such was the labor of many in the politics-of-rights period within the anti-femicide movement as activists tirelessly fought the government’s rendition of victims as public women. By transforming the victim’s image from that of “worthless whore” into that of “innocent daughter,” these activists created the context through which mother-activism could and did emerge as the movement’s prominent political strategy. Such labor, without a doubt, is a requirement for the successful production of a cause based on mother-activism since, in the absence of innocent children, mothers do not wield the moral force of mother-activists. When the children are tainted by a discourse that condemns them for the violence that ended their lives, their mothers appear as women who mourn the loss of children who went down a bad path. Such mourning rarely provides the basis for political activism.

Another example of such a situation is also found in Ciudad Juárez, where the young men and women who die as part of the violent drug economy that ravages the city are not represented by mother-activists or family organizations. Even though many of these young people come from working poor families and from the same neighborhoods as many of the femicide victims, they do not count as “innocent victims” within a discourse of drug violence that always blames the victim. These victims are regarded as “guilty” of their own murders by virtue of an association with the illegal drug economy, so their families do not have the moral ground that justifies the claims presented by mother-activists on behalf of their “innocent” children.

But once again, true to the commodity-form as described by Marx, regardless of all the work required by mothers and others to produce mother-activism, the mother-activist image emerges via her testimony as a commodity that hides the social relations of its own production. Instead of seeing all of the labor that goes into its making, the mother-activist appears to emerge as the natural outcome of a mother’s experience in losing a daughter. She does not seem to be the product of social labor but, rather, an outcome of the natural order of things. So even as the mothers exert tremendous energy, along with countless others, to produce their testimony and put it into circulation as the harbinger of a particular kind of cause, the mothers’ own stories deny the exercise of this very labor.

But Marx’s analysis alone does not reveal the full dimension of this paradox. Yet again, the tools of post-structuralist feminism show how the discourse of the public woman creates a context in which mother-activism must always deny the labor that goes into its making. This requirement derives from the initial acceptance by mother-activism of the patriarchal definition of motherhood as a natural relationship rather than as a principal component of something that could be called “reproductive” or “domestic” labor. To acknowledge motherhood as a form of “work,” along with other domestic tasks associated with social reproduction, is to reinforce feminist demands that women’s labor within the home be recognized as such. Instead, mother-activists echo the patriarchal refrain of motherhood as a natural, rather than political, relationship. The conservative

radicalism articulated by mother-activists is achieved when the labor of motherhood, including a mother's fight for her children in repressive political contexts, is rendered invisible. Only then does the mother-activist emerge as a symbol of a movement based not on public labor but solely on the private duties, emotions, and obligations of domestic women. As a result, the discourse of the public woman against which mother-activism sets itself establishes the terms by which all the labor—of the mothers and other activists, past and present—must recede from view if mother-activism is to succeed as a political strategy, since to acknowledge the labor is to acknowledge the social relationships binding public to private women in the anti-femicide campaign.

Yet it is this very invisibility of the mothers' labor that, again paradoxically, lies at the heart of the critiques that many mother-activists and their supporting organizations use against each other and against other activist groups as they struggle over the making of an anti-femicide movement in northern Mexico. As one mother-activist complained at a July 2007 protest, "It's exhausting and hard (work to protest) ... while other people profit in our name ... and fill their pockets with money" (Sosa, 2007). These remarks were directed against domestic and international activists, some of them other mother-activists and their organizations, who attended a protest in Ciudad Juárez in July 2007. What these remarks reveal (and they are by no means unique to this particular event) is how mother-activists compete against each other in the making of their cause even as they suffer from the same problem as any laborers under conditions of capitalism: they do not have access to the resources that their own commodity generates through its circulation. Rather, ensnared within the confines of the public-woman discourse, these mothers must deny the labor they put into their activism even as they speak of how hard they work, how their work creates a marketable image, and how they do not receive the resources generated from its circulation through the international circuits of nonprofit capitalism (Chaparro, 2004; Salcido, 2004b; Sosa, 2007). Hence, and to use a bit more of Marx, the mothers and other activists who have worked to create the mother-activist face the paradox that the fruit of their labor confronts them like a commodity, as something that circulates beyond their control and that hides their labor that it embodies. Mother-activism emerges in this way as "an object," alienated from the many public and private women who made it (Marx, 1844).

Such was the case during the 2004 V-Day protest in Ciudad Juárez, when the activists who had participated in the anti-femicide protests as mother-activists and as those who supported them parted ways (Salcido, 2004b). They were caught in the cross-hairs of the public woman discourse, which dictates the terms by which mother-activism must materialize as a politics that denies the very labor required to create it, even as they work so hard to generate international resources in the extremely competitive market of social justice causes. As groups compete for scarce resources, they do so by reproducing the very discourse that has so beleaguered the anti-femicide campaign from its beginnings during the early period of the politics of rights. They continually reaffirm the legitimacy of a public-woman discourse that ceaselessly vexes the anti-femicide movement of northern Mexico.

CONCLUSION

Early marketing of the Jennifer Lopez film, *Bordertown*, a fictionalized account of the crimes in Ciudad Juárez, included an endorsement and appearance by one of the mother-activists at the film's opening. Amnesty International shows photos of Ms. Lopez on its Website surrounded by additional mother-activists whose significance is clear. Their image, and the stamp of authenticity it conveys, are part of the film's marketing strategy.

To make such an observation is not to criticize the practice.³⁰ Rather, it is to acknowledge the capitalist context in which nonprofit causes and their organizers must operate. And it is to turn attention to how the pressures and internal contradictions of capitalism are inescapable even for organizations that do not share the signature characteristic of capitalist entities: the accumulation of profit. They must compete within this context, which means that they must, in one way or another, participate in the generation of profit even if they cannot keep those profits for themselves. This participation can occur in numerous ways but one of the most common versions lies within the production and marketing of causes that attract tax-deductible donations, which are, after all, crucial for the preservation of capital in contemporary capitalism. The organizations and individuals within the anti-femicide movement certainly demonstrate many of the stresses created by capitalist market pressures on their relationships.

Yet as this movement also reveals, a critique of capitalism does not adequately explain the tensions that are tugging at the movement's social fabric. As I have tried to show, only by appreciating the significance and durability of the public-woman discourse in contemporary Mexico can we begin to sort through the complex social relationships within the movement's productive destruction. Without an understanding of this discourse, the battles over the victims' innocence make no sense in a country where homicide is already and always a capital offense. Likewise, this discourse tells us why mother-activism is a powerful political strategy not only in Mexico but also elsewhere. To be sure, the repetition of this discourse provides plenty of evidence for Judith Butler's claim that "to repeat" is "to produce" since the public woman who lives and breathes through the stories about her is as much a part of the material reality of northern Mexico as is industrial capitalism. Indeed, I believe it impossible to understand the capitalist processes of the region without appreciating who she is and what she stands for. And equally impossible is a comprehension of what the anti-femicide organizations are really fighting as they coalesce and disintegrate around the contour line of the public woman.

As the anti-femicide movement shows, mother-activism represents a powerful tool for women as they fight for social justice in a context where women's public participation is dismissed as socially perverse. Indeed, mother-activism offers a political identity for women who prefer to present themselves as "mothers" in the public sphere and who otherwise might not engage in political activism. It has proven to be an extremely effective identity for integrating women into political praxis. But when this identity is the *only* one recognized as "legitimate" within a social movement, other forms of women's activism are silenced. For this reason, the government's deployment of the public-woman

³⁰In the spirit of full disclosure, I make tax-deductible contributions to Amnesty International.

discourse as a means for discrediting non-mother-activists has been central to efforts to silence their activism and effectively remove them from engaging in Mexico's democratic process. When presented as a response to the public woman discourse, "mother-activism" actually reinforces many of the strategies used to silence women and exclude their participation in the public sector. So one of the challenges for mother-activism as a political strategy is to figure out how to recognize the relationships binding public to private women in their social justice work.

To highlight the limits of this strategy is simply to recognize it as a political strategy that, like any other, has advantages and disadvantages. As has been well demonstrated regarding citizens' rights movements, of which the first politics-of-rights period is an example, such strategies also reproduce the exclusions upon which citizenship always depends (Brown, 1995). All of this is to say that there never seems to be one best way to organize social justice campaigns. For this reason, it seems essential, as Iris Marion Young (1990) famously wrote, that coalitions form across different approaches as a flexible political tactic. The women of northern Mexico's anti-femicide campaign have no choice but to engage with the discourse of the public woman, as it is a weapon that can be pointed at any time at any woman who ventures onto the street as she works, walks, or participates in her country's democracy. Strategizing against the deployment of this weapon seems a crucial step for the building of effective coalitions across public and private women that can ground the international geography of the anti-femicide movement within local political practice.

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