


Spring 2021

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Recommended Citation

Pangol, Melanie, "Colonial/Modern Gender System & Femicides" (2021). *Student Publications*. 919.
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/919

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Abstract

The research paper addresses how a decolonial feminism framework has been applied to the anti-femicides movement that are happening in Ciudad Juarez. Furthermore, the paper argues that due to the cheap and exploitative labor force status that has been imposed upon black and brown female bodies, such women have been disproportionately impacted by gender violence.

Keywords

Femicides, U.S-Mexico border, decolonial feminism, colonial/modern gender system, Ciudad Juarez

Disciplines

Feminist Philosophy | Latina/o Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

Written for LAS/PHIL 215: Latin American and Caribbean Philosophy

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Colonial/Modern Gender System and Femicides

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PHIL 215: Latin American & Caribbean Philosophy Midterm

Professor Nathifa Greene

Mainstream/bourgeois feminism has established white womanhood as the standard of womanhood that tends to speak for every woman so that the focus on race has neglected and dichotomized gender, sexuality, class, etc.¹. Moreover, the mechanisms of heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification exercise violence across the colonial modern gender system that constructs a worldwide network of power². In understanding that there are different forms of gender and sexual violence that colonized women each experience differently, a decolonial feminism framework seeks to articulate and center various forms of racialized gender and sexual violence that are endemic to colonization³, particularly how the colonial, modern, gender system cannot exist without the coloniality of power⁴.

Therefore, analyzing the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality serves to understand how heterosexual male supremacy has exhibited the systematic violence inflicted upon women of color and colonized women⁵. Within a decolonial feminism framework, it is essential to organize around a coalition where learning about the history of colonized women in their own context is a means to understand how differences can fragment communities in search of liberation approaches⁶.

With coloniality as a global hegemonic knowledge system that is very much intertwined with the present structures of power, conceptual borders⁷ have been created for the sake of

¹ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex" Women Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984): 66-67.

² María Lugones, "Heterosexuality and the Colonial / Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 187.

³ Yomaira Figueroa, "After the Hurricane: Afro-Latina Decolonial Feminisms and Destierro," *Hypatia* 35, no. 1 (2020): 221.

⁴ Lugones, "Heterosexuality," 202.

⁵ Lugones, "Heterosexuality," 188.

⁶ Figueroa, "After the Hurricane," 223.

⁷ Anibal Quijano & Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 567.

capitalism, and division of labor that has been racialized and gendered⁸. Therefore, the paper will focus on black and brown women and their status as a cheap and exploitative labor force⁹ ¹⁰ for the maquiladoras in U.S-Mexico border cities; such women have been disproportionately impacted by femicides. Due to the normalization of the violence towards such women and the impotence from institutions of power to recognize and address femicides, art expression¹¹ has been utilized in the border space to voice the erasure and disappearance of “dark-skinned” women bodies¹² as well as to be in contention with urban public spaces¹³ and create solidarity.

Coloniality has become a world order of knowledge and power where western Europeanism is the hegemonic center of the world¹⁴. Therefore, it is essential to take a Latin American geography and modernity/coloniality approach to depict and understand the landscape of Ciudad Juarez as both a femicide machine and as a counter-geography of violence assembled through the memorialization of femicides in the form of art, public displays, protest, and collectivity¹⁵.

According to Gloria Anzaldua, “By the end of the nineteenth century, powerful landowners in Mexico, in partnership with U.S. colonizing companies, had dispossessed millions of indigenous nations out of their lands--- The Mexican government and wealthy growers are in

⁸ Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 191.

⁹ Gloria Anzaldua, “The Homeland, Aztlan,” pages 1-13 in *Borderlands: the new mestiza = La frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987): 12-13.

¹⁰ Danielle J Lindemann & Teresa M Boyer, “Desperate Fortunes: Latina Warehouse Workers in the ‘Matrix of Domination,’” *Labor Studies Journal* 44, no. 2 (2019): 175.

¹¹ Emilia Quiñones-Otal, “Women’s Bodies as Dominated Territories: Intersectionality and Performance in Contemporary Art from Mexico, Central America, and the Hispanic Caribbean,” *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad* 31, no. 3 (2019): 679.

¹² Guadalupe Taylor, “THE ABJECT BODIES OF THE MAQUILADORA FEMALE WORKERS ON A GLOBALIZED BORDER,” *Race, Gender & Class* 17, no. 3 (2010): 351.

¹³ Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (2013): 2.

¹⁴ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality,” *Foundation Frantz Fanon*: 10.

¹⁵ Elva Fabiola Orozco, “Mapping the Trail of Violence: The Memorialization of Public Space as a Counter-Geography of Violence in Ciudad Juárez,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 18, no. 3 (2019): 132.

partnership with American industries which own factories known as maquiladoras. One-fourth of all Mexicans work at the maquiladoras and most happen to be young women”¹⁶. In a world reconfigured by the colonial project, the foundations of Latin American and Latinx feminist claims are found in feminist reflections on gender and difference¹⁷. Since colonialism required the invention of race, gender, and the regulation of sexuality to produce capitalist modernity¹⁸, the story of Latin America and the Caribbean cannot be understood outside the context of U.S. interventionism, which undergirds the production of empire initiated by the seizure of Native lands and the project of slavery¹⁹. Hence, the role of the U.S. in Latin American and Caribbean politics exemplifies the shift of power dynamics from models of colonialism to imperialism, which continue to characterize U.S. involvement in the region to this day²⁰.

The colonial models of property were legitimized by Aristotle's concept of “natural slave.”²¹ In the Americas, the concept of the natural slave transformed into Sepúlveda’s “natural law”;²² at the same time, the concept developed beyond the systems of trans-Atlantic colonial modernity and into the contemporary system through which the United States has been the neo-imperial power and where its intervention with Latin America has been displacing indigenous nations for the sake neoliberal globalization²³. Anti-femicide scholars have linked the femicides to the inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 among the

¹⁶ Anzaldúa, “The Homeland,” 10.

¹⁷ Stephanie Rivera Berruz, “Latin American and Latinx Feminisms,” pages 161-179 in *Latin American and Latinx Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 162.

¹⁸ Berruz, “Latin American,” 162-163.

¹⁹ Berruz, 166.

²⁰ Berruz, 166.

²¹ Alejandro Santana, “The Indian Problem: Conquest and the Valladolid Debate,” pages 36-56 in *Latin American and Latinx Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 42.

²² Santana, “The Indian Problem,” 42-43.

²³ Santana, 50.

United States, Canada, and Mexico²⁴. After the NAFTA trade was signed, many U.S. technology companies set up a series of assembly plants called maquiladoras at Mexico's northern border. The products manufactured in countries outside of the American continent are taken to the maquiladoras to be assembled—with low labor costs—and then transported to the United States²⁵. The ramifications of NAFTA signified a hegemonic racist colonial and gender system that has had an impact on the labor system, in particular how the labor is structured to disproportionately put at-risk black and brown female bodies in relation to hegemonic notions of private and public spheres²⁶ that encompass femicide. As a result, to analyze from the standpoint of intersectionality theory to understand the labor market experience²⁷ of black and brown women, it is essential to address both the maquiladora space as a site where the construction and reproduction of race/ethnicity, gender, and class takes place²⁸, and how the recognition of interconnected marginalizing systems²⁹ can lead to the collective liberation and destruction of the political-economic system of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy³⁰.

According to Rita Laura Segato's theory of race, race amounts to a certificate of origin that individuals carry on their bodies³¹. It is in this sense that Latin Americans are embodied landscapes: people who carry the historical mark of conquest, defeat, and colonization on their bodies³². Furthermore, in the construction of race as a bodily mark that projects the colonized landscape onto the body, it is possible to assert that the hegemonic gender system adds an

²⁴ Orozco, "Mapping," 133.

²⁵ Quiñones-Otal, "Women's Bodies," 680.

²⁶ María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 743.

²⁷ Lindemann & Boyer, "Desperate Fortunes," 166.

²⁸ Lindemann & Boyer, 166.

²⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination," pages 221-238 in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 227.

³⁰ Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 213.

³¹ Orozco, 137.

³² Orozco, 137.

additional mark to women's bodies that establish their captivity. Particularly, the creation of antagonistic relations between black and brown people tapped into existing myths that recalled women's supposedly inherent flaws to justify their punishment, disciplining, and captivity³³. Therefore, the separation of public and domestic space both privatized and minoritized indigenous and black women, making them extremely vulnerable to masculine violence³⁴.

In Ciudad Juárez, economic prosperity became highly concentrated around industrial parks and the city center, both of which gained better services, tax cuts, and land concessions in return for their investment³⁵. In contrast, the majority of the maquiladora workforce live in slums located in the city's outskirts. Slums feature poorly finished brick houses and dwelling spaces built out of discarded and shoddy materials. Neighborhoods lack paved roads and basic services, including clean water, electricity, sewage, garbage collection, and efficient public transportation. In fact, the point about the stark contrast between industrial parks and slums is not merely that one is rich and the other poor, but rather that the city's spatial arrangements are designed to make industrial parks thrive while the material environments available for workers and average people imperil their subsistence³⁶. Therefore, the existing spatial arrangement in Juárez reinforces the dehumanization of racialized, gendered, and sexualized peoples and reduces them to being one more cog in an enormous production machine: the ultra-capitalist city³⁷. Moreover, the contrast between these two public spaces demonstrates that neoliberal and neo-imperial policies of capitalism create violence not only on human beings but on ecosystems. The plantation monoculture system, as the provenance of capitalism as the world economic system³⁸, addresses

³³ Orozco, 138.

³⁴ Orozco, 138.

³⁵ Orozco, 140.

³⁶ Orozco, 141.

³⁷ Orozco, 142.

³⁸ McKittrick, "Plantation," 3.

how the economy system of the plantation has aligned and transformed into the economy of the urban landscape³⁹. One transformation has been the transfer of violence against black bodies from the plantation to the urban setting. Additionally, in the border having a trajectory of displacing indigenous nations, the violence is transformed into the industrial labor system where the presence of the maquiladoras has not only displaced and restricted people to assigned locations but has also perpetuated violence against dark and brown women.

Therefore, the dichotomous hierarchies that became woven into the historicity of relationships between people⁴⁰ are a product of the global plantation monoculture and as a result, such a system not only imposes binary structures but is a threat to life itself. According to Yomaira Figueroa the concept of *destierro* captures the complex and multiple forms of dispossession of home for Afro- and indigenous-descended people in the modern world⁴¹, and in the global system of the plantation monoculture hierarchies of gender and race are contingent on the dispossession of people⁴² and the disposal of bodies in the urban spaces⁴³.

In addressing that the exploitation of people and the ecosystem maintains capitalism as the world economic system⁴⁴, it is essential to take an interdependent humanity approach centered around the concept that anything that threatens human interdependence is an ecological threat⁴⁵. As result, to create ecologically viable, inclusive and interdependent societies, we must create social movements that include all humans⁴⁶. Additionally, the plantation monoculture has

³⁹ McKittrick, 2.

⁴⁰ Lugones, "Toward," 743.

⁴¹ Figueroa, 222.

⁴² Figueroa, 226.

⁴³ McKittrick, 9.

⁴⁴ Aurora Levins Morales, "Ecology Is Everything," pages 3-9 in *Medicine Stories* (New York: Duke University Press, 2019): 7.

⁴⁵ Levins Morales, "Ecology," 4.

⁴⁶ Levins Morales, 8.

also perpetuated hierarchies of knowledge that center around the absence of sensation, resulting in the suppression of the erotic as a source of power⁴⁷. Hence, the chasm between the spiritual, the psychic and the emotional leads to the epistemologies of knowledge imposing the objective, reason and mind as male, while the subjective, feeling and nature are female, so that the division of emotional and intellectual labor maintains women as the protectors of the emotional and the men as the rational. As a result, decolonial attitude centers around love⁴⁸, creating a decolonial aesthetic that keeps the body and mind open and connected, keeping the senses sharpened in ways to respond critically to separation⁴⁹.

The coloniality of gender lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power⁵⁰. As a result, the surplus group that have been occupying the place of the dehumanized and inferior⁵¹ at the maquiladoras have been dark-skinned ethnicized women from indigenous and mestizo origins that have migrated to the northern part of Mexico searching for a way to survive⁵². In the maquiladora industry, female subjects ceased to be human beings so as to become objects of consumption whose value is related to profit⁵³; therefore, the oppression of the ethnicized woman needs to be maintained in order for globalization to exist.

From the modernity/coloniality perspective, the differential access to justice represents an effect of the coloniality of power and gender. The hegemonic gender system introduced since the colonization of the Americas intensified existing hierarchical relations between colonized

⁴⁷ Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Out & Out Books, 1978): 88.

⁴⁸ Maldonado-Torres, "Outline," 23.

⁴⁹ Maldonado-Torres, 27.

⁵⁰ Lugones, "Toward," 746.

⁵¹ Lorde, "Age," 64.

⁵² Taylor, "THE ABJECT BODIES," 351.

⁵³ Taylor, 351.

peoples, which resulted in the creation of antagonistic social relations between colonized women and men, especially through women's social, political, and spatial confinement, and the cruelty and indifference that colonized men show toward women⁵⁴. Therefore, the lack of institutional involvement to prevent, investigate, and prosecute extreme gender violence is what scholars and activists describe as impunity. In this view, impunity from the law and femicide go hand in hand⁵⁵.

The politics of recognition⁵⁶ in this case within the space of Ciudad Juarez is about erased landscapes where public officials are denying that femicides are a real problem⁵⁷. Therefore, Mexico, as a settler colonial state that is in alliance with a neo-imperial power is reproducing configurations of colonial power through which the recognition of femicides systematically is determined by the colonial state⁵⁸. Recognition from the state towards the realities of women is an unequal power balance⁵⁹; therefore, women in depending on their recognition and institutional accommodation⁶⁰, have faced misrecognition that has led to a distorted version of women being⁶¹ blamed for their own deaths based on the ways that they perhaps "provoked" the heterosexual patriarchy to generate violence against their poor, dark and brown skinned bodies. Therefore, the transformation of people into objects still continues through the unequal exchange of institutionalized and interpersonal patterns of recognition in which people internalize the derogatory images of being objects, demonstrating how the settler gaze can inflict damage on

⁵⁴ Orozco, 143.

⁵⁵ Orozco, 143.

⁵⁶ Glen S Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 4 (2007): 438.

⁵⁷ Orozco, 144.

⁵⁸ Coulthard, "Subject," 439.

⁵⁹ Coulthard, 440.

⁶⁰ Coulthard, 448.

⁶¹ Coulthard, 442.

colonized women⁶². Since the U.S.-Mexico border will only recognize femicides insofar as this recognition does not question the political and economic framework of the colonial status quo⁶³, personal and collective self-affirmation⁶⁴ has manifested in the form of an anti-femicide approach and funeralizing the landscape of Ciudad Juárez⁶⁵. Therefore, mapping violence and utilizing Ciudad Juárez to visibly vocalize⁶⁶ the femicides exposes the how the neo-colonial state to continue to exercise violence especially against dark and brown female bodies.

Art is used as a form of exploration of the connections between imperialism and gender violence in which the female body can be used as a metaphor for both the invaded geographical territory and the patriarchal incursion into women's lives⁶⁷. The funeralization of the landscape in Ciudad Juárez is manifested through the public display of memorial objects by the victims' families, human rights defenders, artists, and activists⁶⁸. Therefore, in taking a critical Latin American geography and modernity/coloniality approach, memorial objects recreate an agonizing landscape in Ciudad Juárez to expose the deadly effects of an inherited colonial gender structure that has naturalized extreme gender violence. Memorial objects also reveal a new understanding of gender relations in search of decolonization⁶⁹.

In particular, pink and black crosses have emerged as the most emblematic symbol of the mothers' struggle to end femicide, over time becoming a symbol of the anti-femicide struggle. The crosses are strategically displaced in tourist areas of Ciudad Juárez to force the authorities,

⁶² Coulthard, 444.

⁶³ Coulthard, 451.

⁶⁴ Coulthard, 453.

⁶⁵ Orozco, 133.

⁶⁶ McKittrick, 5.

⁶⁷ Quiñones-Otal, 678.

⁶⁸ Orozco, 134.

⁶⁹ Orozco, 134.

and ordinary residents, to treat femicide as a public problem⁷⁰. The cross “itself is a physical marker of memory” that gives death a presence⁷¹ particularly in relation to how most female bodies have been systematically erased since in most cases mothers’ cannot reclaim the bodies of their daughters due to their physical disappearance. As result the black and pink crosses have sought to denaturalize gender violence⁷².

Graffiti is another artistic expression of memorialization in Ciudad Juárez that serves to fill “empty” spaces⁷³ with anti-violence motifs and protests against corruption and anti-democratic governments. Graffiti is most often found in those neighborhoods most affected by violence, covering the barren walls of destroyed and abandoned houses, schools, churches, and bridges⁷⁴. As a result, graffiti fosters a counter-geography of violence through spatial art that places the lives of ordinary people above corporate interests, capitalist consumption, or monetary gain, promoting women’s rights, democracy, and solidarity through messages⁷⁵.

Altogether, memorial objects and bodies recreate an agonizing landscape in Juárez to expose the deadly effects of an inherited colonial gender structure, including spatial inequality, that naturalize extreme gender violence⁷⁶. At the same time, memorial objects and bodies offer a model to decolonize existing gender relations that produce zones of female death by rehumanizing the victims, denaturalizing spatialized gender violence, and fostering spaces of encounter that forge solidarity among different groups⁷⁷.

⁷⁰ Orozco, 145.

⁷¹ Orozco, 147.

⁷² Orozco, 148.

⁷³ Orozco, 151.

⁷⁴ Orozco, 150.

⁷⁵ Orozco, 151.

⁷⁶ Orozco, 145.

⁷⁷ Orozco, 152.

Coloniality is a global hegemonic knowledge system, a commercial order and political order that is still very much dominated by a global white western system that has defined people according to dichotomous social constructs and geographical categories⁷⁸. Therefore, the coloniality of power focuses on conceptual systems, larger-scale social practices, economics and institutions, and the overall evolution of schemas of knowledge. Due to the fact that coloniality has resulted in creation of borders, regions have been depicted with separated histories. Therefore, in taking an analytical approach to address how places are connected in hemispheric ways, it is necessary to deconstruct how social geographies have been defined according to capitalism, resulting in the world being organized around hierarchies and labor division based on race, gender, sexuality, etc.⁷⁹.

Since the violence of patriarchal modernity and coloniality have been normalized as the natural order of the world, violence towards women of color and colonized women has been an affirmation of masculinity in a modern/colonial world⁸⁰. Therefore, colonized women tend to be exposed to various interconnected marginalized systems that mainstream feminism completely neglects⁸¹. Feminism has established the invisible but purposeful standard as white; therefore, the category of race has been absent in relation to gender and sexuality⁸². As a result, white womanhood has become the standard of womanhood. In the context of the U.S.-Mexico border and the femicide against dark and brown colonized women due to their interconnected levels of vulnerability regarding the labor system structure of the maquiladoras, an anti-femicide approach has been taken to utilize Ciudad Juárez, known to be a femicide machine, as a counter-

⁷⁸ Quijano & Ennis, "Coloniality of Power," 536.

⁷⁹ Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 191-193.

⁸⁰ Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 203-204.

⁸¹ Lorde, "Age," 66.

⁸² Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 202-203.

geography of violence through the public display of memorial objects⁸³ in the form of a protest expression against misrecognition by both the United States and Mexico. Therefore, the intimate, everyday resistance interactions to the colonial difference⁸⁴ are manifested through forms of artistic expression that reconnect the body with the concept of the erotic. The result is a connection of the physical, the emotional and the psychic, which can bring about reconciliation with trauma and lead to the process of community self-healing through naming the violence⁸⁵.

⁸³ Orozco, 132.

⁸⁴ Lugones, "Toward," 743.

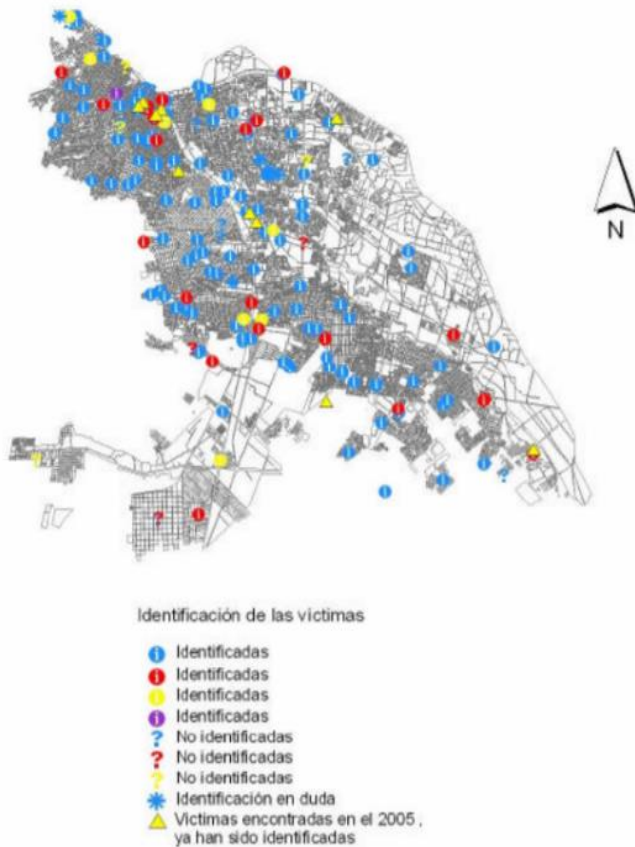
⁸⁵ Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*, 89.



Map about the highways and intersections between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, demonstrating that such border cities tend to be heavily congested by constant movement⁸⁶.

⁸⁶ Todd Bensman, “As Mexican Hospitals Collapse, American Border Ones Fill,” [map] Center for Immigration Studies: Low Immigration, Pro-Immigrant, Center for Immigration Studies, October 27, 2020, <https://cis.org/Bensman/Mexican-Hospitals-Collapse-American-Border-Ones-Fill>, accessed March 23, 2021.

Víctimas del feminicidio identificadas y no identificadas en Ciudad Juárez 1993- 2005



Map about femicide victims in Ciudad Juárez that have been identified and not identify between 1993-2005. Hard to get statistics and/or maps that address with recent numbers from serious outlets⁸⁷.

⁸⁷ “Víctimas del feminicidio indetificadas y no indetificadas en Ciudad Juárez 1993-2005,” [Victims of Femicides Identification and Non-identification in Ciudad Juárez 1993-2005], Geografía del feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez Y Chihuahua [Geography of Femicide in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua], Camara de Diputados H. Congreso de la Union, 2006, <http://archivos.diputados.gob.mx/Comisiones/Especiales/Feminicidios/geografia02.htm>, accessed March 23, 2021.



The pink and black crosses that have become a symbol of the anti-femicide struggle and the embodiment of memory against silence and disappearing of females' bodies. Particularly highlighting mothers being at the forefront of the movement⁸⁸.

⁸⁸ Driver, Alice. "Talking to Alice Driver About Violence Against Women in Juarez." [photo] Longreads. Longreads. <https://longreads.com/2016/02/03/talking-to-alice-driver-about-violence-against-women-in-juarez/>, accessed March 23, 2021.



Graffiti and murals as an expression that visually vocalize not only the deaths of dark and brown girls and women but also manifesting message of resilience, especially to the young women at the slums⁸⁹.

⁸⁹ Alice Driver, "Talking to Alice Driver About Violence Against Women in Juarez," [photo] Longreads, Longreads, <https://longreads.com/2016/02/03/talking-to-alice-driver-about-violence-against-women-in-juarez/>, accessed March 23, 2021.

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