

Missing the Story
Debbie Nathan (from *The Texas Observer*, August 30, 2002)

...The victim, 17, was beaten to death in her parent's home by her boyfriend, 27. They had two children. He said he murdered her because she was going to marry someone else.

...The victims, ages 15 and 13, were found in the house of the older girl's boyfriend. They were bound and had gunshot wounds to their heads. Both had been raped, and the older victim showed signs of torture, with slash wounds in the throat and puncture wounds on the back. An autopsy revealed that the younger girl had had four heart attacks, probably due to the terror she suffered while being tortured. The boyfriend fled Juarez but was apprehended three years later. He told investigators that he and his girlfriend got along well together, but he had become angry and refused to marry her after he found out she went on a date with another boy. Her infidelity, he said, "threatened his manhood." She visited his house with her little sister and confronted him about his refusal to get married. He kept both girls tied up for almost two weeks before shooting them to death. At the time he was 17 years old.

(These excerpts and others quoted throughout this article are taken primarily from Ciudad Juarez newspapers during the past 10 years. They are available at www.casa-amiga.org.)

Senorita Extraviada -- in English *Missing Young Woman* -- is the latest work from acclaimed filmmaker Lourdes Portillo. Earlier this year it won a Documentary Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Recently it aired on PBS's documentary showcase, *POV* and was screened at a benefit in Austin. For many viewers, the film will represent the first news they have had of the terrifying violence against women that has been raging for a decade in Ciudad Juarez. Others already knew of the murders: Reporters have been filing the story for years, in venues from the *New York Times* to the BBC to CNN. Portillo's film is the most powerful description to date of a horror that few people on either side of the border really care about. It has the potential to change attitudes and promises to be the template that activists use to shape their understanding of the crisis. That's exactly why it desperately needs to be examined with a critical eye.

I intend to do this here, though I suspect doing so will provoke charges that I don't give a damn about Mexican women. I'm going to talk about numbers -- about how many women have actually been found to have been murdered and raped by strangers in the desert, versus the much higher number Portillo claims in her film. I will be deflating the film's figure, and for many that will sound like the nasty arithmetic of Holocaust deniers, even though serious Holocaust researchers also refine their numbers, and sometimes lower them, with the best of intentions.

I am juggling numbers not to erase the dead and disappeared women of Juarez but to make other women *reappear*, in hopes that their reappearance in our consciousness will

help prevent further deaths in Juarez. My calculations are intended to make you think about the girl who had the heart attacks while being tortured by someone she knew well. To make you recall the young mother who was killed not in the desert by strangers, but by her lover in her father's house. In contrast to Portillo, I believe that stopping femicide in Juarez is not just about catching a serial killer or a group of homicidal bus drivers or a coven of corrupt cops. To solve the murders and keep more from happening, the public first needs to know that the vast majority of the dead did not simply vanish from sight one day. Their corpses were not found strewn in the desert. Most were not raped. Yes, it's true that some 80 women and girls *have* been found dumped in the sand, and that many were violated sexually by perpetrators who remain unidentified. Eighty is a horrifying number, intolerable. But 80 is not 270, which is the ballpark figure that *Senorita Extraviada* and filmmaker Portillo cite as the number of Juarez women since the early 1990s who have been raped and murdered in the desert by unknown assailants. In fact, the 270 figure is mostly made up of cases like the following:

...The victim, 21, was murdered by her husband. Her body was found with 21 knife-wounds. The husband was apprehended while playing soccer. When agents asked him about the murder he calmly recounted his crime.

...A 60-year-old woman died after being beaten and raped by her stepson, age 32. He confessed that he had killed his stepmother while under the influence of inhalants.

...The victim, 32, and her young children died in a fire that her nephew admitted starting because "his aunt said he was gay."

Before the early 1990s, almost no women were murdered in Juarez. Female homicides averaged a scant handful of cases annually -- far lower than in U.S. cities of similar size. Then something happened. All of a sudden women started dying violently. Some mysteriously disappeared, then reappeared as raped corpses in the desiccated outskirts of the city. Simultaneously with this stranger-inflicted crime, boyfriends, husbands, sons and cousins began beating, shooting, stabbing and strangling the women and girls in their lives. Previously, domestic violence, intra-family sex abuse and what today is called "date rape" were pandemic in Juarez (as they are in all patriarchal cultures, including the United States). In Juarez, the police didn't care because the law didn't care, and very few victims complained. Males had their way with females; the latter suffered terribly. But hardly any died. Not until a decade ago.

What happened?

Was it the drug trade? In the early 1980s, most cocaine entering the United States from Colombia came through the Caribbean and South Florida. That route was then shut down by the DEA and other anti-drug agencies. As a result, the drug conduit shifted to Mexican border cities like Juarez. Soon the area was overrun by narco-mafias, who brought with them the violence and police corruption typical of gangland mega-business. And in the early 1990s the North American Free Trade Agreement was instituted.

NAFTA meant more cross-border commerce, along with stepped-up government efforts to halt airborne and tractor-trailer smuggling of cocaine across the border. The Juarez narco-mafia responded by breaking big shipments into smaller quantities and farming them out to petty hustlers in Juarez. Doing so meant when a person got caught, hardly any product would be lost. Suddenly, Juarez' working-class neighborhoods were awash with young men who had ties to the drug trade and personal stashes of mind-blowing stimulants.

Maybe these men started tasting their own wares. Maybe the cocaine and the money and the narco culture made them crazy. What's indisputable is that they -- along with the bigger mafiosi -- started offing each other with a vengeance. The male homicide rate in Juarez skyrocketed in the 1990s to unheard of heights. These days, slaughtered, butchered and scorched male corpses are found far more frequently than women's bodies are. Few seem surprised, much less outraged, by this male-on-male carnage.

But how do we explain the dead women, when few seem involved in the drug trade? Maybe they've just pissed off too many men -- men now living in a very hyper, violent society. Juarez women have never been well regarded, and lately they seem more despised than ever. Back before the United States foisted the maquiladora industry onto the Mexico border, the city was known by Mexican and gringo men alike as the capital of vice, a place where you could always find a whorehouse and a whore. Juarez is obsessed with its reputation as the bordello of Mexico -- it hates the idea and it hates the prostitutes. The maquiladora PR people like to say that after their industry came to town in 1964, the whores redeemed themselves by taking factory jobs for \$4 a day. Maquiladoras were deliberately developed to employ women rather than men (maquila managers think women workers are more docile). Even when assembly lines are sexually integrated, managers often encourage females to act femme and males to pump up their machismo. (For more on this creepy phenomenon, read University of Chicago sociologist Leslie Salzingers soon-to-be published book *Gender in Production*.) All this displacement and performance creates tension among the sexes and ire among men.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of young women have streamed into Juarez from the Mexican countryside in the last generation. They ride buses across town to work. They earn their own paychecks. They organize TGIF happy hours at bars where a few years earlier the only female clientele were prostitutes. Many young women have managed to attend school to learn careers. Others work as store clerks. They are out and about, working, dancing, studying, having sex for love and -- maquila wages being what they are -- sometimes sex for money. Their lives challenge the traditional idea that a man rules the family and has the sex, and a woman just stays at home. But there is built-in backlash to this change, both culturally and economically.

The maquilas have always been based on high turnover. Their repetitive, assembly-line jobs are so low-paid and enervating that for years, the entire blue-collar staff of a typical factory would leave every several months, usually to find work at other maquilas, where the process would begin anew. Management liked turnover because it generated no seniority, and therefore no pay raises or perks. Turnover meant that maquilas, Juarez'

defining insitution in when it comes to women, deemed women discardable. Use them when you need them. When you don't -- poof! they disappear.

Meanwhile, many people in Juarez assume that women who work in maquilas, or women who frequent clubs, or women who dress in sexy clothes -- that they're all whores. And whores in Juarez deserve what they get.

...Victim, 20, was found strangled in a motel room. She worked at a night club downtown. Her husband, 25, is accused of the crime. He murdered her because she was about to leave him and she was an exotic dancer.

...Victim, 23, was a dancer at Bar la Bahia and was killed by her husband, age 50. He entered the bar and without saying anything shot his wife and left.

...The victim, 24, was murdered in daylight in front of several people in a place with heavy vehicle and foot traffic. She was a worker who was just leaving a maquiladora. A man approached her and an argument ensued. He attacked her with a knife. The witnesses did nothing to stop him. That afternoon the victim's husband told police he killed his wife out of jealousy. She had previously complained to the police about his abuse, but got no response because her injuries were not considered serious.

While women like these were dying at their husbands' and boyfriends' hands, others were being found in the desert after being murdered and raped by shadowy unknowns. In the mid-1990s, a Juarez leftist and feminist named Esther Chavez began making a public issue of all these deaths: the desert sex homicides *and* the more common cases of domestic violence. Chavez started keeping a body count. As of this summer it is in the 270s. To reiterate, fewer than a third of these 270 fit the scenario described in *Senorita Extraviada*: the young woman vanished without a trace who is later found as a pile of bones in the sand. For years now, Juarez has been convulsed in speculation about whether these 80-some desert deaths are due to a serial killer, several serial killers, the police, bus drivers, satanists, pornography makers, body organ traffickers, and the list goes on, ever darker and weirder.

In 1999, Chihuahua authorities asked the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in suburban Virginia -- the famed *Silence of the Lambs* serial-killer investigative unit -- to send agents to Juarez. After a week working there, the FBI determined that the murders were probably not the work of serial killers, but rather of dozens of men who did not know each other. Other U.S. law enforcement authorities dispute this finding, but agree that if serial killers are involved, there are many of them, and they probably aren't working together. Esther Chavez sees the desert murders as one grotesque end of a broad spectrum of male violence against women -- violence, mostly domestic, that has lurched out of all previously known bounds, partly because of the citywide culture of female disposability, and partly because men these days know they can get away with it. And anyone can dump their victim in the desert. Doing so may sound especially bizarre to gringos. But in Juarez, municipal garbage pickup is a joke, so everything unwanted goes onto the sand. The perimeter of the city is strewn with the

endless detritus of illegal trash disposal: old clothes, one of a pair of shoes, broken baby dolls, beat-up mattresses, dead pets, filthy Pampers. And now, human corpses.

Impunity reigns in Juarez, for various reasons, and it's reasonable to believe that local police are involved in *some* of the desert murders. Juarez law enforcement authorities are low-paid, barely professionalized, and thoroughly prone to corruption by narco-traffickers. The police and the traffickers intersect in the red-light demimonde of the downtown Juarez night clubs. That area is the city's main market for drug sales and for supposed police attempts to stop the sales -- attempts quite likely to end in bribery of the cops and subsequent teamwork between them and the narcos. The club district is where many young working women make a living as exotic dancers and sex workers, or by selling products like make-up to club employees. The bars are also a place where young maquiladora workers like to socialize at the end of the day or on weekends. They are perfect places for sadistic men to lure or force females into cars, then drive them to the desert for a session of gang banging and murder. Even girls who shun the bars are in danger, since police and narcos can rove the city for their prey.

But filmmaker Portillo does not stop with local cops. In post film Q & A sessions and media interviews, she has posited a far-ranging sex-murder conspiracy reaching to the "highest levels" of Mexican government, relying on statements by some of the murder victims' family members to the effect that investigators often give them the run-around. Portillo also interviewed a woman who went to authorities to report having been raped by cops at a police station. Some time after she was filmed describing the assaults, the woman contacted Portillo again and claimed -- though she'd never before told anyone -- that her police attackers gleefully showed her photos of women they had raped, killed and burned in the desert. When I saw *Senorita Extraviada* in June at a Human Rights Watch film festival in New York, a horrified audience member asked Portillo if she had taken the woman's allegations to the government. No, Portillo said, because the authorities never tell the truth anyway so why bother? But what about this poor woman, another audience member asked. Wasn't she in grave danger from the police now that she'd blown their cover on film? What was being done to protect her? Portillo shrugged and said something about how the woman's talking publicly would be her best protection.

I wonder if Portillo feels troubled about the credibility of her informant's story of the photos. As I watched the film, I began to get skeptical midway when Portillo, as narrator, began describing geometric knife marks on some corpses as "evidence of ritual sacrifice." It is well known among law enforcement experts that sex murderers often deface bodies with bizarre, ritualistic markings that have nothing in particular to do with satanism or "sacrifice." My fears that Portillo had veered into pop-culture paranoia were unfortunately reinforced when she summed up to the audience her theory of the desert deaths: A "web" of murderers, she said, are capturing and killing girls in order to make highly profitable "snuff films." As far as law enforcement authorities internationally, including the FBI, are aware, no films have ever been made in which people are killed that films of their murders can be distributed or sold. Stories claiming they exist pack a punch, but operate on the level of urban myth. (Neither is anyone known to ever have been kidnapped or slaughtered by body organ traffickers, though this, too, is a common

explanation in Juarez for the murders.) Anything can happen for the first time. But it's more reasonable to assume that Portillo has gone the loopy way of government conspiracy theorists. That tends to happen to people who immerse themselves in the horrors of Juarez. And why not, after one spends months looking at the battered skulls of young females, at corpse after mummified corpse with missing nipples and the signs of anal rape?

After seeing such things, conspiracy thinking becomes a kind of psychic defense mechanism. It focuses clearly on a culprit; it's a place to point one's finger. Portillo may be especially tempted to finger the top levels of government. Now in her fifties, she moved with her family from Mexico to Los Angeles when she was 13 years old. In the mid-1980s, she established her reputation with an Academy Award-nominated film about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, women in Argentina who organized to make their government come clean about what it did to thousands of young people who "disappeared" during the dictatorship. In *Senoritas Extraviadas*, Portillo again aims her cameras at mothers and other family members who organize together, this time to pressure a government to solve the Juarez sex murders.

In focusing again on activist families, Portillo naturally presents the crisis from their point of view.

That means she echoes, even amplifies, their desperate efforts to present their daughters as young women who deserve justice. Infuriatingly, Mexico is a still place where politicians, police, and society in general love to hunt for reasons why a young woman who experiences sexual violence is a whore who "deserved" to be raped and even killed. Things are probably even worse in Juarez, with its special hatred of prostitutes. The state governor during the 1990s, Francisco Barrio, said the city's females were inviting their own murders by hanging out with the wrong crowd at bars. The state assistant attorney general, Jorge Lopez Molinar, blamed staying out late and skimpy dress. Between a rock and a hard place, families are thus loathe to deal with the fact that many beloved daughters *do* go to cantinas, and many *do* communicate sexuality through their clothing. Yet to acknowledge this is to imply that one's child is a slut undeserving of redress. It's a cruel conundrum that has forced activists in Juarez to use a public rhetoric in which victims are all church-going, girlish innocents. Throughout Juarez, protesters memorialize the women by painting utility poles with pink squares and crucifixes. A similar verbal image even appears in *Senorita Extraviada's* title, since "senorita" means young woman in Spanish, but it also means "virgin." Using such representations -- and implying that the government is snatching virgins to make evil snuff films -- makes the whole situation seem horrible, but at least easy to grasp and rail against. But it "disappears" the married women, the cohabiting women, the women with lots of kids, the middle-aged women, the old women, the exotic dancers -- and yes, even the prostitutes -- whose bodies have also been strewn across Juarez by their lovers, husbands and kin. Ciudad Juarez is not Argentina in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Indeed, throughout Latin America we have left the age of the dictatorships; today the name of the game is neo-liberal democracy. Neo-liberalism in a place like Juarez means decreased government services to the poor and more laissez-faire capitalism. More

narcotrafficking and the mayhem that goes with it. More media glitz and hype (with everyone watching the show, but most unable to afford the thrills that the media hawks). The destruction of older, patriarchal gender roles that gave males the power but asked them to at least act toward women like gentlemen. A replacement of those old roles not so much with equality as with masculine backlash. Less communalism or civic participation. More "every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost." The hindmost the devil is taking seems to be women's -- violence against females is said to be rising in many areas of Latin America. Yes, one can point to high government as the perpetrator, but only indirectly. These days, the person who shoots the gun or commits the rape is most likely to be a young man from the same humble circumstances as the victim. This is certainly true when one looks at the real meaning of statistics in Juarez.

„The husband was apprehended while playing soccer, and when the agents asked him about the murder he calmly recounted his crime. However, by then his dead wife's body had already been incorrectly identified as that of a woman who had disappeared -- the identification had been made by that woman's parents. Later the presumably dead woman appeared and told authorities she had left with her boyfriend and was not the victim after all. The body was exhumed and positively identified by the husband who committed the murder.

Why do the Juarez police screw up so royally, not just with investigations of the desert murders, but often even with domestic violence cases? The problem is not just low-level corruption and ties to the narcotraffickers. As anyone familiar with Latin American police forces knows, calling these agencies professional is an act of semantic charity. Even before drugs became epidemic, police in Mexico were low-paid, uneducated, and eager to grab a bribe wherever they could. Cases were often solved not by investigating suspects but by torturing them. Lack of professionalism goes hand in hand with lack of resources. If a "developing" country wants to modernize its police forces, it must spend billions of dollars: for liveable and bribe-proof salaries, education, state-of-the-art forensics labs, and fancy computers and databases to coordinate the data.

Virtually none of these exist in Juarez. Without them, solving a string of serial murders is difficult to impossible. But it's also hard for an underfunded, unmodernized police force to solve cases of "common" crime. At the same time, it's hard these days for politicians in the Juarez area to accede to demands by women's rights organizations to let the FBI come back to Juarez to investigate the sex murders. So far, the state has refused to re-issue the invitation. Is that because the Mexican government fears exposure as an accomplice in the killings? Or is it because of fear that asking the gringos for help would be politically humiliating? It could be one reason, it could be the other, or it could be both. But *Senorita Extraviada* implies only the first one: government nervousness about being unmasked as culprit. There is a denial of complexity in the film that worries me. I'm afraid it will confuse, even impede, the growing movement to stop the violence and get justice for as many women as possible who've already died.

Say, for instance, that lots of people who see *Senorita Extraviada* follow Portillo's suggestion (see her website at <www.lourdesportillo.com>) that they write President

Bush, their legislators and the Mexican government to demand a decent investigation. Say that as a result of this pressure, the FBI or UN or OAS go to Juarez and starts gumshoeing. What happens when these foreign investigators tell the world, "Gee, it isn't really 270, it's more like 80"? Will these authorities explain to the world that women murdered by domestic violence are just as dead and violated and deserving as the sex-murdered girls in the desert? Or will they simply draw two moral columns as the public rebukes activists -- including Portillo -- for crying wolf?

Something like this is already happening. Go on Portillo's website and you'll see a list of places where people can respond to the movie by donating money to organizations in Juarez. One such group is Casa Amiga. It's the battered women's shelter that Esther Chavez started a few years ago, after she realized from her growing list of murders that something needed to be done about all the battering, shooting and sex abuse that was happening in Juarez women's own homes. Portillo is to be lauded for listing Casa Amiga. But recently, apparently after viewers of *Senorita Extraviada* started contributing to the shelter, several mothers of missing young women issued a public statement denouncing Chavez. They accused her of misleading people by not telling them their money will be used to deal with domestic violence, not cases of missing women or anonymous sex murder. They say Chavez is dishonest. She's not. The problem is that the public doesn't understand the numbers. Apparently, neither do the activist mothers.

In a movement that is beleaguered to begin with, such dissension is easily manipulated by local politicians. Juarez and the state it is in, Chihuahua, have been swinging back and forth for years between two political parties, the PAN and the PRI. For strictly opportunistic reasons each has always been eager to blame the other for the murders. Lately, feminists at the municipal level have been organizing giant, cross-border demonstrations calling for justice, attended by women dressed in black. The municipal-level government has been intermittently run by the PAN for more than 15 years, so in response to the demonstrations, the PRI -- which governs the state -- has been mobilizing women dressed in white and accusing the PAN of "manipulating" naive mothers for its own ends. If the mothers start fighting with feminists like Chavez, the big political parties will only collect more grist for their cynical mills. It's a shame to think that a numbers game could add to the conflict. Portillo could have avoided such problems -- and provided a greater service to the women of Juarez -- by folding the domestic violence murders back into her work.

...The victim, 32, was murdered outside Casa Amiga, where she worked. She had originally come there for help after suffering serious abuse at home. She was the mother of four young children. Her partner had tried to kill her outside Casa Amiga two months earlier. He was detained then by the police and charged. He was released after only 36 hours, even though the authorities knew he was dangerous.

It's too late to save this woman. Still, it's encouraging to see demands for justice growing. One hopes the clamor will not ignore what and whom the number 270 really entails. All kinds of women are in that calculus and all kinds of violent death, from the shadowy and mysterious to the unfortunately all too mundane. What will it take to make Juarez safe for

women? Good law enforcement? The legalization of drugs? Better jobs (or any jobs at all, now that the maquilas are fleeing to China)? Decent work for men? Real democracy, including a civil society committed to equality of gender?

None of this will be achieved simply by catching some serial killers. Perhaps the only way to even imagine what needs to be done is to remember the silenced 270. The reality of their lives and deaths is missing from *Senorita Extraviada*. Even so, it mustn't be forgotten.

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