Art that Silences and Art that Speaks: Approaches to Memorializing Feminicide in Ciudad Juarez

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[Because] memorials are objects of public commemoration, we demand a lot of them. They serve as testaments to lives lost, as repositories of grief, and to facilitate processes of mourning. We expect them to do the work of history writing, to draw single comprehensible narratives out of a Gorgon’s nest of individual, often contradictory, experiences. These meanings serve as unifying forces, reinforcing the idea of a shared national identity and healing rifts in the communal experience of nationhood. By endowing memorials with the

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Approaches to Memorializing Feminicide in Ciudad Juarez

by Colleen Mary Carpenter

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names the murder of women and girls femicide simply because they are female, acknowledgment of the scope and seriousness of the problem of femicide; and it meant honor, respect, and dignity for the women who had died; it meant a public field where the young women's bodies were a tragedy. The hope was that the empty investigations, police indifference, and even hostility towards the victims and their families, the government was now going to acknowledge—words, with land, and with art—that the lives of these young women mattered, and that their deaths were a tragedy. The hope was that the empty field where the young women's bodies had been found, previously marked simply with eight wooden crosses, would be transformed into a permanent, public memorial park. A public memorial meant honor, respect, and dignity for the women who had died; it meant a public acknowledgment of the scope and seriousness of the problem of femicide; and it meant that the nation itself was now being asked to redefine itself as a community that lamented these deaths, and that cried out together, “No more!”

It is perhaps not surprising that this is not what happened. A memorial was, in the end, built—but in such a way that the story it told amounted to a betrayal of the dead, and an act of further violence against the mothers who still mourned. The memorial at Campo Algodonero demonstrates that the power and authority of public memorials can be turned against the victims purportedly being memorialized: memorials can silence the past, separate it from the present, and distance viewers from victims. Again, it is not surprising that art has the power to harm as well as to bless, but it is important to be able to recognize which one is actually happening, regardless of what is being said about the art in question. Moreover, it is important that we work to understand how this happened—important not just socially (in terms of understanding how community identities can be manipulated), but important theologically, as well. If lament is understood as “a public expression of profound faith, prophetic in context and content,” then a false lament, like a false prophet, betrays the community and dishonors their faith.

A public memorial that silences the oppressed rather than giving voice to their lament is in the end a lie, a cruel and dangerous thing—more so, even, than a simple refusal to engage those who are crying out for justice and healing. In the rest of this essay, I will offer some context and background about the femicide in Ciudad Juarez and the various practices of lament that have marked the community's response. I will then show how the memorial at Campo Algodonero fails in its stated purpose of memorializing the victims whose bodies were discovered in that empty field—and works instead to silence the family members who are still seeking justice for their loved ones. Finally, I will argue that the simple pink crosses erected by the mothers of the dead give voice to a far more effective, powerful, and dramatic lament—a cry for justice and a cry of hope—than the expensive, elaborate, yet ultimately empty official memorial.

Feminicide

First, feminicide. This is a relatively new term, although gender-based violence against women is certainly not new. Both feminicide and the related term femicide “have been used to refer to the murder of females because they are female. Frequently, scholars use these two terms interchangeably.” However, following theologian Nancy Pineda-Madrid, I understand feminicide as a term that builds on the more generic femicide in order to describe a particular and even more devastating phenomenon. Where femicide names the murder of women and girls simply because they are female, feminicide names the murder of women and girls as part of a broader, more comprehensive situation that
includes the phenomenon of impunity for the perpetrators because the state is implicated, either explicitly or implicitly . . . [The] crime transpires on a large scale . . . it is widespread and rooted in the structural inequalities that render some women and girls acutely vulnerable . . . [and finally] the killings are exceptionally brutal and vicious. 8

Scholars and journalists agree that the ongoing feminicide in Ciudad Juarez began in 1993, with a sudden “explosive” growth in the number of women who disappeared or were murdered. 9 Statistics on the number of the dead are difficult to come by, in part because one of the marks of this feminicide is the refusal of the authorities to investigate or often even to acknowledge the murders. Families seeking help from the police are dismissed with the suggestion that their missing daughters have run off with their boyfriends, or crossed the border to the United States, 10 or even that they have left home to become prostitutes 11—all this despite the continual discovery of more and more women’s bodies. The United Nations reports that 2,500 deaths each year of women in Mexico can be attributed to gender-based violence; the National Citizen Femicide Observatory, an umbrella group that incorporates over 40 human rights and women’s organizations, has painstakingly collected data about murdered women leading to the conclusion that “at least six women are targeted and killed every day in Mexico.” 12 The great majority of these killings are not investigated, and of those that are, less than 2% eventually result in a trial and conviction. Widespread corruption has meant that investigations into the murders “at every possible level of government (local, state, national, and international) have been intentionally compromised or botched. Evidence has been consistently mishandled, lost, or destroyed.” 13 Moreover, many of the women and girls who were murdered in Ciudad Juarez were also raped, tortured, mutilated, or dismembered. “Hate is what marks these crimes,” says Maria de la Luz Estrada of the National Citizen Femicide Observatory. “The bodies show 20 or 30 blows. They slice off breasts and faces and throw the fragments in the garbage.” 14 This hatred is not only demonstrated by such careless violence, it is also explicitly spoken aloud: “Interrogations have revealed that some perpetrators kill girls and women as a sport, a competition to see who could rape and kill the most girls and women, or as a way for drug cartels to mark their territory.” 15

Lament

By the mid-1990s, activists in Juarez had noticed the rising numbers of murders of girls and young women, and began organizing to call on authorities to end the violence, punish the perpetrators, and keep women safe. Groups such as Voices Without Echo, Women in Black, Women for Juarez, and Justice for Our Daughters were formed by mothers of the victims, and engaged in a variety of strategies to combat the violence. 16 They held marches on the Day of the Dead, International Women’s Day, Valentine’s Day—and when new bodies were discovered. They also began painting reminders of their losses all over the city: black crosses on pink backgrounds became a common sight. City officials worked to paint over and erase the crosses, but the women repainted and replaced them. Later, wooden crosses painted pink and inscribed with the names of victims were erected as markers 17 and, more recently, murals featuring portraits of the dead have become another way to memorialize the murdered women. 18

These practices of resistance and memory can be understood as forms of lament. In the words of South African theologian and activist Denise Ackermann, who participated in the public laments of the Black Sash women’s human rights organization during apartheid, lament is akin to mourning and at times difficult to distinguish from mourning . . . [and yet] it is also more. It is somehow more purposeful than mourning. It signals that relationships and circumstances have gone terribly wrong . . . It is a coil of suffering and hope, awareness and memory, anger and relief, a desire for vengeance, forgiveness, and healing that beats against the heart of God. It is a way of bearing the unbearable. 19

Laments mourn the dead—and they also demand justice. They are a cry to God, but they can also be directed to other people, “summoning the wider community to take seriously the suffering of the present and to long actively for the future. Lamenting, therefore, is an important form of moral agency, particularly for people who have been oppressed or dehumanized by circumstances of injustice.” 20 Indeed, theologian Maureen O’Connell argues that laments have public, moral power in that they have the power to “shift collective consciousness [and] . . . interrupt comfortable complacency with an evocative longing for something different, a longing that can motivate action and orient social change . . . they are politically and socially dangerous.” 21 That danger is certainly recognized by government authorities who have attempted to intimidate protesters and groups calling for an end to the violence; indeed, they even launched a counter-campaign against the women’s groups, claiming that the protestors were using the pain of the victims’ families for their own personal financial and political gain.

It is the mothers’ refusal to give up that marks their activities as more than mourning, as lament that seeks justice. The black crosses are regularly painted over, and the pink crosses taken down—and the mothers return to repaint and
The centerpiece of the memorial is a large bronze statue entitled *Flor de Arena*—Sand Flower. A figure of a woman rises up out of a desert rose; there are fifteen roses on her gown (each rose symbolizing 100 women); and the mantle swirling behind her is engraved with the names of hundreds of murder victims.


The statue was designed by Chilean artist Veronica Leiton, who describes it like this: “The statue represents a strong and young woman, a female image who projects calm and reflection, wearing the gaze of liberation. Her heart contains memory—the memory of the women’s pain and suffering, which the water flowing onto the fifteen roses is meant to soothe and cleanse.” The fountain, Leiton says, “symbolizes the transmutation of women’s weeping into a commemorative elegy for the victims of our city.”

The symbolism might work better if the fountain were actually functional: photographs show neither flowing water nor water in the empty pool surrounding the statue.

Leiton was at the first inaugural event for the memorial, the one that was interrupted by protests. She spoke to the protesting mothers afterwards: “I told the group of thirty mothers who remained after the ceremony that the sculpture was dedicated to the families with all my love and I explained the meanings behind every detail. They were very attentive and emotional. I shared the experience of rebuilding. Their grief will not be erased; their daughters will not be forgotten. In the words of Monica Maher, a theologian whose research focuses on gender violence and who is a former head of Harvard’s Committee on Human Rights Studies, “the ever-present bright pink shouts out that the victims and their allies have not disappeared and will not disappear.” Maher goes on to argue that through their struggle for justice, women “are regaining their self-esteem and generating passionate energy for change . . . [they root their activities in] a spirituality of collective conscience and public voice, a spirituality of creativity, which generates beauty in the process of challenging injustice.”

**Campo Algodonero Memorial**

Their struggle, however transformative, is far from over. The feminicide in Juarez has not ended, but it is also true that the protesting families claimed a significant victory in 2009, when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a landmark decision affirming that the government of Mexico was responsible for the murders of Claudia Yvette Gonzalez, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, and Laura Benitez, three of eight women whose bodies had been dumped at Camp Algodonero in 2001. “The court found that states have affirmative obligations to respond to violence against women by private actors, and that mass violence against women constitutes gender discrimination.” Mexico, the court concluded, was in violation of its human rights obligations as specified in several treaties: the government had failed “to effectively investigate, prosecute and prevent crimes against women, thereby denying the families of the women and girls due access to justice.” The court ordered a series of remedial measures, including reparations to family members, renewed investigations into the murders, investigations of law enforcement officials responsible for the obstruction of justice—and the building of a national monument to the murdered women.

It soon became apparent, however, that the government was not particularly committed to building a memorial to the victims. Much of the land of Campo Algodonero was sold off and a hotel was built on the site. It looms over the wall that surrounds the memorial. Moreover, the memorial is still unfinished: posters cover empty space where the history of feminicide in Juarez was supposed to be inscribed, and there is still dirt where there should be ground cover. The families of the dead note that where there was supposed to be a garden, trees, and a fountain, there is nothing but cement. The memorial has had two inauguration ceremonies: at the first, the families were not invited and instead showed up to protest; at the second, the following year, the memorial was still incomplete.
A pink cross at the site of a horrific crime of violence is a cry of lament. That lament does two things: it brings the memory of the crucifixion to this time and this place—and it sets the murdered woman next to the crucified Christ, asking us to see them together, to see her as embodying the suffering of God in the world. The first is easier to accept in a traditional Christian worldview; yes, we find Christ in places of pain, loss, suffering, and grief. Naming femicide as one of those places of suffering is not particularly shocking, although it does insist on recognizing the humanity of women in a way that too often both tradition and culture resist. The second thing a pink cross does, however—setting the murdered woman next to Christ, so that we see Christ’s suffering in her suffering—asks us to give up a male-centered understanding of Christianity. “Publicly linking female humanity to crucifixion,” Nancy Pineda-Madrid argues, “destabilizes a male-centered Christian imaginary”—and thus the practitioners of this form of lament are giving birth to “a new social imagination,” one that powerfully links their lives and their struggle for justice to the Christian story.

And that, in the end, is what a memorial is supposed to do: announce and shape a community’s self-understanding. With the pink crosses as memorial and as lament, the families and allies calling for justice in Ciudad Juarez are announcing a new self-understanding, one that embraces the full humanity of women, and...
one that neither hides nor yields but stands firm in the face of terror. "Pink crosses mean life can be and must be wrenched from death,"\textsuperscript{37} argues Nancy Pineda-Madrid—and this, of course, echoes what has always been the central Christian message: God wrenches life from death; God defeats injustice; God is on the side of the suffering, the poor, the abandoned. The community that has arisen out of the horrors of feminicide in Juárez is a community shaped by the struggle for justice, the struggle against patriarchy, and the struggle for life. It is a community born in lament, a passionate lament that mourns the past but never loses hope for a new future; it is a community that refuses to accept violence as inevitable and the lives of its young women as disposable. The forces arrayed against it seem invincible—the feminicide continues; the impunity of the perpetrators remains unchanged; the voices crying out for justice are still being ignored. And yet those cries continue: this is a community that refuses to be silent. It is a community that has claimed its voice—a relentless, insistent, courageous voice of lament. The seemingly powerless members of this community testify to us all about the startling power of our vulnerable, crucified God. Let us not ignore their testimony.

\section*{Notes}

3. Wolfson.
4. The full ruling by the court—a document of over 150 pages—can be found at http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_205_ing.pdf.
5. Ken Ellingwood, "Court cites rights failure by Mexico in Juarez killings of women," The Los Angeles Times (December 11, 2009). The quoted activist is Irma Guadalupe Casas, director of Casa Amiga, a Ciudad Juárez group that works with victims’ families. articles.latimes.com
8. Ibid., 12.
9. Ibid.
14. Judith Matloff, "Six women murdered each day as femicide in Mexico nears a pandemic," Al Jazeera America (January 4, 2015). america.aljazeera.com
17. Ibid, 131.
20. O’Connell, 189.
21. Ibid., 191.
22. Maher, 133.
23. Ibid., 136.
26. Ibid.