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Bronze Roses, Pink Crosses, and Femicide: The Art of Lament in Ciudad Juarez

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Visitors confronting the power and solemnity of public memorials often fall silent. Confronting the enormity of the event commemorated before them makes normal daily chatter seem disrespectful, if not obscene. And yet memorials are not, in the end, about silence, but about *lament*. Lament, in turn, is a form of public discourse that moves between grief and hope, loss and renewal, and suffering and redemption in such a way as to both announce and shape a community's self-understanding. Through lament, memorials shape how and what we remember, and thus shape our identities as members of a particular community. Art historian Elizabeth Wolfson reminds us that:

[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 ability to accomplish these tasks, we bestow them with an extraordinary amount of power and authority. (art21.org)

We can see that power and authority at work when we remember the controversy that surrounded the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Now widely if not universally accepted as a powerful, solemn, respectful and moving tribute to the dead whose names are so simply listed on the black marble, the memorial was once condemned as a “degrading ditch” and a “black gash of shame.” Critics worried that the meaning constructed by the stark black walls descending into the earth was one that did not honor the dead but instead focused on defeat and guilt—or worse, worried that the memorial was, in the end, “meaningless” (art21.org).

Similarly, the construction of the 9/11 memorial was marked by a variety of disagreements, each one in the end revolving around whether a particular aspect of the planned memorial spoke clearly of honor, respect, and dignity. When does the attempt to honestly portray loss and grief cross over into portraying defeat? When does the attempt to evoke a glimpse of the bleak horror of that day cross over into failing to lift up the heroism of so many of the dead? Those who argued about this memorial—and indeed, any memorial—were in the end arguing about how to accurately portray *the truth of what had happened*—and what that means not just for the past, but for the present and the future of the community as well.

Thus in 2009, when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered the government of Mexico to construct a public memorial to eight victims of the ongoing femicide in Ciudad Juarez, the ruling was met with joy by the mothers who had fought so long for the deaths of their daughters to be taken seriously. The empty field where their daughters’ 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. 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” (O’Connell 189), 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 my talk this evening, 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 then go on to argue that the pink crosses erected by the mothers of the dead are in the end a far more effective, powerful, and dramatic act of lament.

Femicide

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” (NPM 11). 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” (NPM 12).

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. 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, or even that they have left home to become prostitutes—all this despite the continual discovery of more and more women’s bodies. The United Nations reports that 2500

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" (globe and mail). 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" (NPM 17). 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" (alJ). "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" (NPM 15-6).

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. 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. Later, wooden crosses painted pink and inscribed with the names of victims were erected as markers, and more recently, murals featuring portraits of the dead have become another way to memorialize the murdered women.

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" (110-111).

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" (O'Connell 189). 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" (191). 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 rebuild. 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 133). 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" (136).

Campo Algodonero Memorial

Their struggle, however transformative, is far from over. The femicide 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 Berenice, 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" (CUNY 319). 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.” (FWire). 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 (FW).

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 built on the site—you can see it looming over the wall that surrounds the memorial here. You can also see that much of the memorial is still unfinished: the posters are covering empty space where the history of femicide 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.

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—you can see that there is no water flowing.

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 Chile, where the government also erected an official memorial, which the Chilean people later re-appropriated as their own space.” Leiton expressed the hope that something similar would happen at Campo Algodonero—that it would become a site of “alternative truth-telling and memory, empowering and unifying the community in the struggle for justice and social change.” (FW). It is intriguing that she recognizes that the memorial as it stands—with her statue—is not yet something that empowers and unifies the community, and it is not empowering precisely because it does not yet embody the truth-telling and memory that the mothers are trying to express.

Indeed, one of the mothers points out that the memorial seems to be deliberately set apart from the community: the entire space is surrounded by a high wall, and there is nowhere nearby to park. “It is as if the government didn’t want people to go there” (More or Less 158) she said. And of course, this is true: the memorial, after all, had the potential to be a powerful place that would indeed gather people together for truth-telling and justice. Realizing this, the government initially proposed, instead of a memorial at Campo Algodonero, “a flower arrangement in a large pot in another part of the city” (Sanchez 123). Latino studies scholar Martha Chew Sanchez argues that “the memorial has been a major embarrassment to the local and national oligarchy . . . [it] destabilizes the state’s contrived consensus of peace” (117).

And this is true, in a way—but it is not enough, and it does not recognize the deeper problems that mark the memorial. Yes, Campo Algodonero is an embarrassment to the government—but it is as little, and as un-noticeable an embarrassment as possible. The memorial is deliberately incomplete and inaccessible. It avoids history; it skirts around the truth. This avoidance of truth is most obvious in looking at Flor de Arena: a statue of a young woman looking triumphantly skyward—while the names of her dead companions float away behind her, an afterthought to her beauty, youth, and radiance. This is not a resurrection but an erasure; the women who were so brutally killed are not truly memorialized in the roses on her skirt or in the mantle swirling behind her but instead are simply missing—like the water that is supposed to “soothe and cleanse.” The only way that something remotely like this could be acceptable as truth-telling would be if the feminicide had ended; then, perhaps, the rise of a powerful young woman out of the emptiness of the desert would make sense. Given the ongoing violence, however, the statue makes little sense and indeed serves to obscure the truth.

Pink Crosses

On the other hand, I believe that Veronica Leiton designed the statue with all good intentions—certainly her stated hope that the statue would empower people for justice and social change points in that direction. Yet her work was co-opted by a government determined to avoid the reality of feminicide, and even more determined to avoid making any real changes that could reduce or end the violence. Thus Flor de Arena is—at least for now—a failure; an empty gesture.

But where the statue stands alone in an empty park, the pink wooden crosses that once were the only markers of the dead at Campo Algodonero have spread throughout the city. And it is here, with these crosses, that the lament for the murdered women can be heard most clearly. A

pink cross is a strange thing. Nancy Pineda-Madrid points out that “typically, Christians paint crosses somber colors—browns and blacks—but not pink. Pink creates dissonance. Pink is not a color associated with horrific tragedy” (117). Why then did the creators of these crosses choose pink? The most obvious answer of course is that pink is a color associated with women and girls, especially young girls. And insisting on the fact that these victims were female, and died because they were female, is a powerful statement.

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 that life can be and must be wrenched from death,” 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 femicide in Juarez 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, in the end, a community that testifies to us all about the startling power of our vulnerable, crucified God. Let us not ignore their testimony.