

# Double Lives: Reiterations of Gender Violence in Anti-Femicide Protest

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## Abstract

Mass femicide is made possible by an environment of impunity afforded to the injury of women. This work demonstrates how women are crafted into victims before the first instance of physical injuring, by expanding the definition of femicide to include violence against women that occurs before and after death. An archive of antifemicide protest by Susana Chávez and Diana the Huntress of Bus Drivers is used to highlight the productive nature of reiterations of femicide violence. Analyses draw from feminist theories of embodiment and performance theory in order to make legible the cyclical nature of gender violence.

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Since the mid-1990s, women have been murdered in the El Paso-Cd. Juárez area in epidemic numbers. The reality of femicide at this borderland is markedly unavailable by usual forensic means; the bodies of women are mutilated past the point of identification, and statistics regarding femicide are incomplete if kept at all. Considered as a single instance of injuring, or even 4,000 single instances of injuring as some activist organizations estimate, femicide remains illegible and therefore unpreventable. It is not until the violence is reiterated by antifemicide activists in literature, protest, or vigilantism that the loss of young women and the horrific violence done to them becomes recognizable at a societal level. Femicide is represented twice, not as a discrete instance of violence, but as a larger social phenomenon that begins long before and ends long after the physical death of victims. Only when antifemicide activists reiterate violence, like the stripped Diana the Huntress statue shooting her arrows to the sky, or the vengeful Diana the Huntress of Bus Drivers vigilante taking a life for a life, can the trauma of femicide be made available to be seen, acknowledged, understood, and stopped.

This paper seeks to expand the understanding of femicide radially outward in two directions to include both the ontological deconstruction of women that occurs long before their deaths, and the second iteration of femicide violence after death that ultimately makes these crimes and their victims legible. I argue that mass femicide is made possible by an environment of impunity afforded to the injury of women, particularly in domestic violence and corporate human rights violations, and will demonstrate how this impunity crafts women into victims of femicide before the first instance of physical injuring. By making use of an archive of antifemicide protest, including the vigilantism of Diana the Huntress of Bus Drivers, as well as the poetry of Susana Chávez, the productive nature of reiterations of femicide violence will be highlighted. Analyses of both sides of the femicide phenomenon will draw from feminist theories of embodiment, border studies, trauma theory, and performance theory in order to make legible the cyclical nature of gender violence.

## Toward a New Definition of Femicide

Femicide refers to the serial murder of women, linked through common characteristics.<sup>1</sup> In Juárez, bodies are discovered on societal fringes, in empty urban lots, garbage cans, or undeveloped desert. Complete corpses show evidence of rape and other sexual trauma: bruising and lacerations at their sexual organs along with semen and other foreign bodily fluids. Bodies are frequently found wearing another woman's undergarments. Not all victims are so physically complete. Mass graves are unearthed containing the body fragments of multiple women, often so deconstructed that they are unable to be reassembled or identified. In particularly large grave sites, the disembodied limbs are so unidentifiable that a total count of victims remains undetermined.

Scholarly discourses on femicide use the term to specifically reference only the act of bodily gender violence against women. While it succeeds in highlighting the physical trauma suffered by women, and alludes to the ontological destruction of femaleness that is the goal of injurers who enact such violence beyond mere killing, this understanding of femicide reduces the violence against women to bodily injuring alone.

This paper makes use of the materiality of the femicide corpse (or corpse fragment) as the origin of all understanding of this gender violence, but also uses the term to designate the disembodied, social violence against women that predicates the physical. This expansion of the term femicide acknowledges the atemporal and fractal nature of the murders occurring in Juárez, in which every point in the phenomenon contains the same elements: female bodies opened in order to be surveilled inside and out, sexually punished, and therefore ontologically deconstructed. In Juárez, women are physically killed just once, but that killing comes as a result of the social phenomenon this work calls femicide. Women may move in and out of the process of femicide, experiencing one, several, or all of the methods of surveillance and enforcement. The torture and murder that designate the dominant definition of femicide is the climactic moment of this phenomenon, the moment where figurative, metaphorical, or social violence is made physical, but denotes only a single part of the larger systems at work.

The violent injuring that occurs in Juárez is indeed exceptional in its extremity. The length of the encounter between victim and murderer is too prolonged to be simply an act of killing. The sexual abuse and torture that occur before death, and the dismemberment and/or immolation of the body after death, allude to a desire to do more than just kill, but also ontologically destroy. That is, the criminals who commit femicide seek not to destroy a single woman, or murder would be enough. Rather, in deconstructing the female form, treating victims as interchangeable in mass graves, we must understand that it is not a single woman but womanhood itself that is the target of these attacks. The perpetrators seek to destroy the unacceptable notion of femininity in their actions, to destroy the identity of women, not merely to kill a single woman. In destroying the body beyond recognition, they destroy the

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<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon this paper terms "femicide" is also referred to in English-speaking discourses as "feminicide" or, in Spanish, "feminicidio."

conception of women as ontologically or identifiably human. This understanding proves that femicide belongs not in the conversations of quotidian crime, but rather the realm of horror, defined as that which “[offends] the ontological dignity of the ‘complete’ or ‘singular’ body” by Adriana Cavarero.<sup>2</sup>

Equally applicable to femicide is Elaine Scarry’s comments on the collapsing of world that occurs in the deliberate infliction of pain, into which femicide surely fits: during torture, “it is not the pain but the regime that is incontestably real.”<sup>3</sup> By encouraging us to think about the regime that endorses torture and grants it sovereign power, Scarry’s definition provides a vehicle for intervention in the definition of femicide that refers only to the moments of injuring. The regime that becomes “incontestably real” during femicide is the patriarchal and neoliberal power structures at work in the borderland, which create the environment of impunity for gender violence in Juárez. Previous academic and humanitarian work on the Juárez femicide trend has acknowledged these root causes for gender violence, but separates them from bodily violence. My analysis builds upon work by Leslie Salzinger, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Melissa Wright, and others, who have documented the responsibility of patriarchal gender norms and cross-border capital in creating and maintaining an environment in which women are easily victimized. I argue that not only do these institutions allow the injury of women to occur, they are each actively performing the same acts of bodily surveillance and gender enforcement as femicide, and therefore belong under the same definition. By examining the policing and surveillance of female identity upon which these entities depend, the fractal nature of femicide is highlighted. This surveillance begins the process of ontological deconstruction that is mirrored and taken to the extreme in the moments of injuring.

When we choose to understand femicide as a phenomenon of ontological and physical destruction of women, we must also consider the aftermath of death. While the instance of injuring is the apex of this destruction, after death several processes exist that seek to repair the destroyed female identity. Forensic reconstruction by state-empowered medical examiners often fails to undo the disidentification and ontological destruction that signifies femicide due to the extreme violence, collective graves, and interchangeability of victims. In order to succeed at repairing the identities of victims, local women paradoxically reiterate the abject injuring of femicide in their antifemicide activism. These activists, whether poets, political activists, or vigilantes, redraw attention to the very site of injuring in order to capitalize on the female body at its most visible point under the environment of femicide. In reiterating femicide violence, activists make legible the injuring against women, using the horror invoked by abject violence to temporarily halt the patriarchal and neoliberal structures that make femicide possible.

For living women, femicide truly is a “double wound,” to invoke Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma. The public performances of violence that constitute antifemicide activism are also instances of public grief and mourning for the victims of femicide. The work of Susana Chávez and Diana the Huntress of Bus Drivers are acts of memorialization of victims, acts that communicate the trauma of being victims themselves, acts of identity-claiming in a borderland that seeks to

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2 Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 8.

3 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 57.

destroy, trespassing womanhood, and acts of survival. They are crying out, as Caruth describes trauma, “in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise unavailable.”<sup>4</sup>

## Patriarchal and Neoliberal Surveillance

Patriarchy and corporate devaluation prime women for the violence that many of them suffer later in the process of femicide. Long before women are victims of injuring, they are victims at the hands of the cultural impunity for social violence against women. In the words of Rosa Linda Fregoso, women in the Juárez-El Paso borderland are seen “not simply as victims of globalization but as subjects in need of patriarchal regulation.”<sup>5</sup> Considering patriarchal gender norms exacerbated by the North American Free Trade Agreement to be two types of Fregoso’s regulations is not only intuitive, it is statistically proven.<sup>6</sup> Regulation and surveillance of women stems from cultural norms, which stigmatize wives and daughters who choose to leave their families and work outside the home, often in the local maquiladora industry, and from the maquila managers themselves as well. In both cases, the gaze that regulates women through unflinching surveillance, the gaze that turns apathetic in the moments of injuring, is masculine.

The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993 marked the beginning of an upward trend in femicide at the Juárez-El Paso border. The El Paso-Cd. Juárez border is ranked fifth in land trade among U.S. foreign trade gateways, and 18% of all U.S.-Mexico trade passes through this single port of entry. As a manufacturing hub, the area “represents over \$8 billion worth of purchases” according to the city of El Paso.<sup>7</sup> The economies of not just the U.S. and Mexico as a whole, but the local economies of El Paso and Cd. Juárez are dependent on this trade. Among many new regulations, NAFTA removed tariffs for United States imports to Mexico, but left in place the subsidies for American farmers, and as a result, an increasing percentage of rural families fell into poverty. The Juárez population increased, as displaced farmers sought jobs in urban centers, and women increasingly sought jobs outside of the home. These women became especially prized as workers in local factories because of their willingness to accept low pay and illegal conditions for employment, due to cultural disapproval of female workers and the desperate need of their families for income. Roughly 60% of all maquiladora workers are women, who are paid about \$4-10 per nine-hour shift and are subject to discriminatory hiring practices.<sup>8</sup>

Within the maquiladoras, women have been subject to illegal conditions such as health code violations, inability to unionize, body scans, and monthly mandatory pregnancy tests. Pregnancy tests in particular are specifically outlawed by

4 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 4.

5 Rosa Linda Fregoso, *meXicana Encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10.

6 Fregoso, *meXicana Encounters*, 359-373.

7 “El Paso/Cd. Juárez & Southern New Mexico Supplier Database,” *El Paso Suppliers*, available at <<http://www.elpasosuppliers.com>>, accessed on June 1, 2015.

8 “Mexico’s Maquiladoras: Abuses Against Women Workers,” *Human Rights Watch*, August 17, 1996, available at <<http://www.hrw.org/news/1996/08/17/mexicos-maquiladoras-abuses-against-women-workers>>, accessed on April 15, 2015.

Mexican government, but have been reported to continue at American factories including General Motors, General Electric, and AT&T.<sup>9</sup> These acts of biopolitical surveillance do indeed make female bodies legible to the corporation, but only as bodies, streamlined, maintained, and absorbed into the mechanical processes of manufacturing. The ontological dignity of the maquiladora workers is therefore disrupted long before physical violence takes place. In these instances of factory surveillance, female bodies are digitally and medically separated from the identities of women. What is made legible to factory managers is not a complete woman, but rather female flesh defined by its relationship to biologic functions. Women are crucial to the economic stability of the area, and constant surveillance of women is what makes their labor most cost effective to industry.

Not all of the victims of femicide, to the extent that they are able to be identified, are maquiladora workers, but in their position as central, life-giving institutions within Juárez and the local community, the factory surveillance of women becomes the template that is repeated throughout the culture. That this factory surveillance aligns so closely with patriarchal surveillance of women only serves to increase its effects. Fregoso finds this link to be especially clear as she writes, “women who do not conform to the mother/wife model of womanhood (lesbians, working women, women who express sexual desire, and so forth) are suitably punished.”<sup>10</sup> The surveillance of women, whether in the home or in local maquiladoras, is the first instance of ontological deconstruction that goes unpunished.

Women, even dead women, are not invisible in this environment. It is simply that their bodies are only legible when they are generating labor. Julia Kristeva describes the corpse as “the utmost of abjection,” the ultimate point of tension between the recognizable human, in the case of women the ultimate labor-producing human, and the horror-inducing other, from which no meaning can be made.<sup>11</sup> Femicide induces horror not through destroying the identity embodied in the human, female form, but through destroying the potential labor that is the only identity women in this borderland are able to have. To be an inanimate female body, a body in pieces, a body exhausted of value, is to be illegible, impossible to be read for meaning. When we view femicide not as discrete acts of violence that occur in a vacuum but rather as brief, obscured moments of surveillance and abjection that transform female bodies from legible as commodities to illegible corpses, we can see that all women are victims of the climate of surveillance that makes such an act of secreted violence possible.

## Destroying the Castle: the Protest Poetry of Susana Chávez

For Susana Chávez, this environment of femicide not only spurred her to political activism, but also to artistic representations of the victims through her poetry.<sup>12</sup>

9 Dan LaBotz, “Year 2000: Mexico at a crossroads: Fox, Oil, Abortion, Migration,” *Global Exchange California Human Rights Program*, August 2000.

10 Fregoso, *meXicana Encounters*, 4-5.

11 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

12 Chávez’s works, still available posthumously on her blog, *Primera Tormenta*, have yet to be

In both her writing and the performance of reading her works publicly (often at antifemicide protests and events she organized herself), Chávez showcases an intimate knowledge of the unmaking power of injuring. She focuses closely on the materiality of femicide, the body horror produced in the corpse, and in doing so, harkens to the truth of femicide as abjection of women. Even on the level of linguistics, Chávez's careful choice to use gendered pronouns (e.g. "nosotras," "nuestra") in reference to otherwise neutral physical properties of the body ("sangre," "piel") specifies women, and disallows the application of her work to non-femicide injuring. The action of injuring is inverted, as the poems' speakers use their abject bodies to refocus attention on the femicide victims. Chávez's poetry heals the double wound of femicide trauma by reconstructing the victims as complete with body, agency, and voice, a re-embodiment that is impossible to achieve through forensic reconstruction alone.

In "Castillo de el aire," Chávez writes in the voice of a victimized Juárezense woman. The poem centers on this passive, invisible observation on the part of women who after death are completely silenced. Chávez's speaker notes the paradoxical nature of this abjection, which through the ritual of femicide seeks to remove societal relationship with victims, but through violence and crime only prolongs that relationship, saying:

in the incident of absence,  
from which doubt emerges  
to show other silences,  
other truth,  
destroying the castles of air  
we wove without ourselves  
destroying eternity  
devoured by absence.<sup>13</sup>

As previously noted, Chávez is careful here to use the female pronoun "nosotras," "ourselves," here, drawing attention to the devouring "absence" of women once abjection has erased them completely.<sup>14</sup> Women in Cd. Juárez have indeed built the local economy without themselves, responsible for the cheap labor that allows the maquiladora industry to thrive even as they are consistently excluded from the profits or the accompanying class mobility.

The resonance of Chávez's work can be seen in its lasting presence even after the author's death. The well-known antifemicide slogan "ni una muerta más" coined by Chávez continues to be written on pink crosses that families and activists use to mark the mass graves of victims. The connection between art and the abject has been documented by Kristeva, who called it "the essential component of religiosity."<sup>15</sup> Here, this nexus of Chávez's poetry, the Catholic crosses, and their location at the site of injuring work together not only to mourn the loss of female identity and life, but

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formally translated into English; the translations that follow are my own.

13 Susana Chávez, "Castillo de el aire," *Primera Tormenta*, 2004, <http://primeratormenta.blogspot.com/2004/05/ocaso-para-linda-escobedo-he-perdido.html>.

14 In Spanish, lines 12-13 read, "destruyendo los castillos de el aire / que tejimos sin nosotras"; Chávez, "Castillo de el aire."

15 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

also to make visible the deaths of otherwise invisible women through well-known cultural rituals: public art and religious rites of death.

By continuing to locate and perform the violence of abjection within the physical violence done to femicide victims, Chávez's poetry invokes the same feelings of abject horror that the bodies produce. However, writing from the point of view of injured women themselves, Chávez infuses femicide violence with the voices of these women, otherwise silenced, and makes use of the abject horror to work against the very femicide which produces it.

## Two Dianas

The original cast of the famous Diana the Huntress statue, *La flechadora de las estrellas del norte*, stands naked in Ixmiquilpan, Mexico. Nine feet tall, sculpted in bronze, she aims her bow and arrow towards the northern sky. Diana of Ixmiquilpan is injured, damaged at her hips, buttocks, and genitalia. Originally sculpted nude and unveiled in Mexico City in 1942, Diana the Huntress was attacked by Mexican conservative group 'The Decency League' for her uncovered body. They ultimately forced the artist, Juan Olaguíbel, to clothe the statue in newly cast coverings, which he welded to Diana's body in three points. In 1968, when public opinion turned, a petition to remove the coverings from Diana was successful, but her bronze body was hurt in the process. The metal of her sexual features was scarred from enduring the hostile gaze of 'The Decency Group', the forced covering of her body, and the violent rending of her clothes away from her again. A new Diana was cast by Olaguíbel to stand in Mexico City, and the original was sent to Ixmiquilpan in 1970 where she still faces north.

The wounds inflicted upon Diana's seemingly unfeeling metal body and her weathered, unblinking gaze to the north now seem like a parable for the sexually-motivated murder of women (femicide) taking place at Mexico's northern border. Like Diana, women in the Cd. Juárez area are accosted by a masculine gaze and then ritually, violently have their clothes ripped from them. But unlike Diana the Huntress, the bodies of these women are made of flesh, not bronze, and the injuring done to them in rape and torture results not just in marred material, but mass death.

The northerly arrows being fired by Diana the Huntress now seem like warning shots after August 2013, when a woman wearing a blond wig boarded a bus in Juárez, murdered the bus driver, and escaped. The next morning she killed a second bus driver on the same line, again wearing the same blond wig, and again escaped. On the third day, an email sent to La Polaka, an online news site based in Juárez, took credit for the murders and called them an act of vengeance for the victims of sexual attacks committed by the murdered drivers. She wrote, "I am an instrument to avenge ... women who appear weak, but in reality we are brave."<sup>16</sup> This letter was signed "Diana the Huntress of Bus Drivers." Enacting violence in retribution for femicide, the name the woman chose for herself is a tribute to the same warrior-virgin Roman goddess as the statue.

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Kate Kilpatrick, "In Juárez, vigilante justice comes in a blond wig," *Al Jazeera*, November 20, 2013.

The violence enacted by Diana was real, although it contains performative aspects such as the blond wig and the claim of vengeance. What truly links Diana's vigilantism to Chávez's poetry of trauma is the attention to re-embodiment of femicide victims. Chávez reconstructs the bodies of victims through literary and metaphoric ways, but Diana uses her weapon to relocate violence from the bodies of women to the bodies of men, alleged criminals themselves.

In enacting violence in the name of victims, Diana highlights a paradox within gender violence: that the very process of femicide, designed to eliminate women completely from social awareness, only serves to prolong their relationship with society. Rather than submitting to the horror of the abject corpse, which allows female victims to remain disembodied or unidentified, Diana continues to draw attention to the violence against women through her act of vengeance. Unable to highlight the injuring done to women, she injures the bodies of the men she finds responsible for the violence, using male bodies as a proxy for the injuring of femicide. This relocation of the site of injuring mirrors the interchangeability of bodies in mass graves or in the wrong clothing, unable to ever be fully distinguished from each other. By injuring the alleged perpetrators of femicide, Diana further destabilizes the notion of individual and fully separated bodies with the suggestion that if victim identity is porous, so might be the relationship of power between injured and injurer.

A key part of the performance of violence by Diana is the blond wig she chose to wear, a deliberate symbol of hyper-femininity and marianisma culture, which provide a thin veil for the murder she commits. The use of femininity to obscure vengeful motives adds another layer of threat to the symbolic nature of Diana's crime, and brings to mind the words of Mary Russo: "To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off."<sup>17</sup> The wig equally subverts the anonymity or impossible identification of women, whether victims of bodily injury or not. Through these acts of violence and the performative nature of her disguise, which isolates and exaggerates her femininity to be her only identifiable trait, Diana is even able to claim a new name for herself, while femicide victims may not even recover the names given to them at birth.

To read Diana the Huntress of Bus Driver's economy-impeding actions as unintentional due to the base nature of vengeance that her letter implies, dismisses the effects of her performed violence on the neoliberal structures in Juárez, and is disingenuous to the political project of her actions. As we know from her letter, Diana targeted her victims due to their predatory attitudes towards the women on their bus lines. In targeting these two men, not only did Diana stop the immediate danger they presented to local women, but she also wounded the movement of labor in Juárez by enacting violence that shut down the bus lines that frequently carried women from their homes in poor neighborhoods to work at the maquiladora factories. Diana's acts of murder were justifiably demonized, but the irony of a bus line designed to safely carry workers to the poor physical and cultural conditions in the maquiladoras naturally goes unmentioned. In enacting femicide violence on the proxy bodies of bus drivers, Diana demonstrates the precarity of the roles of

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17 Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 70.

victim and murderer in an environment where bodies have become interchangeable in death.

Both Diana of Ixmiquilpan and Diana the Huntress of Bus Drivers represent the duality of femicide trauma in Mexico. Mythic and mortal, injured and injuring, hero and vigilante, Diana the Huntress seems to lead a double life in Mexico, bronze goddess by day and disguised murderer by night. If indeed she does, she would fit all the better into the femicide imaginary as told by Juárezense police. Local officials often explain to families that their lost daughters must have secretly been prostitutes, drug addicts, or gang members in order to deserve the violent sexual assault, torture, death, and dismemberment that signifies femicide.

There is a double nature to femicide, as materialized in the two Dianas and alluded to in police narratives, but it is not alter-egos or furtive criminal activity on the part of victims. The duality of femicide is rooted in trauma caused by the destructive violence enacted upon women. Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma as a "double wound" is particularly apt to talk about femicide injuring that is at once physical and ontological, visible and invisible, occurring both inside and outside of the bodies of victims.<sup>18</sup>

To view femicide solely as discrete instances of violence is to deny half of the femicide phenomenon as it occurs in the borderland. Femicide is a process of duality that, in its complete form, begins with invasive surveillance by women, leads to their illegibility and social death, mandates their physical suffering, and then makes necessary the reiterations of that suffering by those who seek to make bodies legible and thusly stop crime from happening. The ontological destruction that occurs in femicide, evidenced in the excessive, identity-obscuring violence that is emblematic of femicide, urges our reconsideration of bodies as distinct, separate things. The violence of femicide can and must be reiterated in antifemicide performances, whether literary or physical, in order to elevate injuring to a position of social legibility. Although dead, femicide victims lead a second life, or endure a second wound, in the poetry of Susana Chávez or the attacks of Diana the Huntress of Bus Drivers. They even find themselves echoed in the larger-than-life body of Diana the Huntress in Ixmiquilpan.

In order to understand the purpose of antifemicide reenactments of femicidal violence, we must first understand femicide itself not as a single act of injuring, or even a series of injurings, but rather as an atemporal, fractal series of moments, each containing the same elements of policing, surveillance, and ontological destruction of the bodies and identities of women. This expanded definition of femicide makes visible the roles of gender norms and cross-border capital in setting up the environment of impunity that makes femicide possible and highlights the need for a reconstruction of victims that capitalizes on performances of violence.

The female body is the only point at which women in Cd. Juárez are visible to state and cultural consciousness at large, and antifemicide protests find power in the productive violence of their reenactments of violence. In projecting outward the violence enacted on femicide victims, antifemicide activism makes accessible the

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18 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

double trauma of femicide, elevating female victims to social visibility often for the first time. The height of this visibility is evident as the protests strike against the infrastructure of neoliberalism and patriarchy, dismantling the systems at the heart of femicide. With an understanding of how gender violence is applicable to both destructive and productive agendas, we are able to understand how the full process of femicide unmakes and remakes the identities of women in Mexico.

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