Feminicidio, narcoviolence, and gentrification in Ciudad Juárez: the feminist fight

Melissa W Wright
Department of Geography, Department of Women’s Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, 302 Walker Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA;
e-mail: mww11@psu.edu
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Abstract. The fight against impunity continues along Mexico’s border, especially in the industrial hub of Ciudad Juárez. In the 1990s feminists brought this fight to international attention as they launched a transnational justice movement against feminicidio, the killing of women with impunity. In this paper I create a feminist and Marxist frame to show that there is much to be learned from the fight against feminicidio for the ongoing struggles in a border city that is now also notorious for juvenicidio, the killing of youth with impunity, which is occurring in relation to the Mexican government’s declaration of war against organized crime. By situating these justice struggles within a context of North American securitization and neoliberal gentrification along the Mexico–US border, I argue that the feminist fight against impunity exposes the synergy of symbolic and material processes within the drug war. And I argue that this synergy seeks to generate value through the extermination of whole populations, especially of working poor women and their families in this border city today.

1 Introduction
“La cucaracha, la cucaracha, ya no puede caminar, porque no tiene, porque le falta, marihuana que fumar.” [The cockroach, the cockroach, now he can’t walk, because he doesn’t have, because he needs, marijuana to smoke.]

La Cucaracha, an old Spanish folksong, gained popularity during the time of the Mexican Revolution when soldiers from competing factions adapted its lyrics to match their experiences. Determining the precise meaning of its protagonist—la cucaracha—can involve high-spirited discussions covering a range of well-worn questions. Is the cockroach the poor soldier who smokes marijuana to ease the pain from marching? Is it a stand-in for Pancho Villa’s unreliable Model T? Does it refer to las soldaderas, the Revolution’s female soldiers? Or is the song really about a cockroach that likes to smoke dope?

The jingle popped into my head in the middle of an interview that our research team was conducting in May 2012 with the official in charge of public security, Lt Colonel Julian Leyzaola, in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (Mexico) when he referred to the city’s violence problems as a result of “las cucarachas”.(1) This interview took place within the research project “Landscapes, Barriers and the Militarization of Everyday Life along the US–Mexico Border”, a collaborative project with Dr Hector Padilla at the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez and with Dr Juanita Sundberg at the University of British columbia. In this interview, “las cucarachas”, as Leyzaola made categorically clear, referred to “delinquents” and “narcos” (drug gangs), the words commonly used by public and private leaders to describe the problematic elements of Ciudad Juárez society, especially in its crime-ridden downtown. Leyzaola was hired in April 2011 to lead the city’s strategy for fighting the drug war that the federal government had declared in 2007. From 2008 to 2011, the federal army and then

(1) Personal interview with Lt Colonel Julian Leyzaola, 7 May 2012.
The federal police had assumed responsibility for the city’s public security, and Leyzaola was restoring it to the municipal government. Since the drug war declaration in 2006, thousands had died violently in Ciudad Juárez. The majority of those murdered had come from the city’s working poor, especially from its male youth; the majority of those doing the killing had come from the same population (Padilla, forthcoming). This is also the population hardest hit by the city’s economic crash in 2010 as unemployment spiraled to over 20%.

Leyzaola was hired from Tijuana, where he had been tasked with a similar job. His well-founded reputation as someone who used torture and turned a blind eye to flagrant police abuse did not tarnish his credentials in Ciudad Juárez (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Shortly after his arrival in 2011, he described the criminals he sought to catch as “cockroaches that like to live in filth”, who “need filth in order to survive” and who were “not of woman born” (Bustamante, 2011). This terminology of cockroaches has spread along with warnings that firm policing in Ciudad Juárez could lead to an undesirable “cockroach effect” for other nearby communities as, in The Economist’s words, “there are plenty of signs that the pests are already scuttling off to new homes elsewhere” (2011). While Leyzaola uses “cucaracha” to refer to “narcos” and “delinquents”, the victims of the violence are also associated with the label as they are widely presented by Mexican officials, along with their US counterparts, as criminals themselves. As a US official stated in a 2009 interview regarding the violence and its policing in the country, “The Mexican people are paying a very high price because drug-fueled organized crime groups are killing each other. But I believe, and I think the Mexican government believes, that only through this sort of very effective, systematic work can they retake the streets” (in Whitesides, 2009). In a political climate in which, according to the Mexican Commission on Human Rights, fewer than 1% of homicides attributed to organized crime are even investigated, the discourse of cockroaches, narcos, and delinquents overwhelms more specific information about the impoverished youth caught up in the violence. Rather, the logic behind Leyzaola’s pronouncement that if the cucarachas “understand only the language of violence, then we are going to have to speak in their language and annihilate them” (Finnegan, 2010) remains largely unchallenged in civil society. And so a question to ask is: why is annihilating youths preferable to helping them find alternatives to crime? Who profits from their extermination? What are the consequences for the city?

To address such questions, I draw connections between this extermination plan, done in the name of public safety, and an ambitious investment project, underway simultaneously, for regenerating the Ciudad Juárez centro (downtown) as part of a binational investment project funded by transnational capital. Backed with millions from public and private sources, the investors seek to replace the area’s modest tourist base with a tonier crowd who will flock to downtown condominiums flanked by boutique shops and restaurants (Ramírez, 2012). Not coincidentally, the Ciudad Juárez plans are unfolding simultaneous to efforts, by many of the same investors, to inaugurate a massive redevelopment of downtown El Paso on the US side. For the Mexican border city, the plans’ backers have stressed the need for a repoblar, a repopulating of the centro that will create a new image and turn Ciudad Juárez into, as the mayor put it, “the city that it should be” (Luján, 2012). This is the same mayor who has referred to the downtown criminals as “alimañas”, venomous vermin (Bustamante, 2011).

As these investment plans materialize simultaneous to the violence downtown, I have found myself returning to Neil Smith’s groundbreaking analysis of gentrification as a profitable policy of capitalist revenge against the urban poor who occupy real estate coveted by elites. Using a Marxist analysis of capitalist circuitry, Smith shows how, far from being the social renovation touted by its proponents, gentrification (often called ‘urban regeneration’ or similar terms to avoid the controversial label) represents a social assault of the city through the annihilation of working class spaces by bourgeois investment (Smith, 1996). To achieve
their ends, gentrifiers resort to the many measures at their disposal, including coercion and state-sanctioned brutality, to clear out the low-income denizens and free up new spaces for capital accumulation. Especially in the era of neoliberalism with its promarket, public–private initiatives, Smith writes, “the impulse behind gentrification is now generalized; its incidence is global, and it is densely connected into the circuits of global capital and cultural circulation” (2002, pages 427). Gentrification, in short, is a global strategy that well illustrates David Harvey’s depiction of capitalism’s “accumulation by dispossession”, which, he explains, “is about plundering, robbing other people of their rights” (LOGOS, 2006). And, as I intend to show here, the Ciudad Juárez urban renewal project exposes the brutal dispossession integral to a gentrification strategy that profits, directly, from the violent removal of the working poor and from the justification of their deaths as the inevitable outcome of their own disposability. In this case, the absence of the working poor from the Ciudad Juárez centro is more valuable than this group’s potential labor—their deaths more desirable than their rehabilitation.

In further evidence of Smith’s analysis, these events are hardly isolated to Ciudad Juárez, as they indicate a global trend in support of neoliberal gentrification strategies that cruelly dislocate low-income residents (Aalbers, 2011; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Silvestre and Gusmão de Oliveira, 2012; Swanson, 2007). Like in Ciudad Juárez, many gentrification efforts in the Americas have found justification in an association of the urban poor with criminality and with their removal as social cleansing. For instance, during the 1990s plans for renovating downtown Medellín, the former narcoviolence hotspot supplanted by Ciudad Juárez in the 2000s, effectively reconfigured many parts of the central city and laid its foundation as a major tourist draw in South America (Betancur, 2009). The plan’s success in moving out the working poor was evidenced by a high-profile write-up in a recent New York Times travel section. As the author observes, “the cartel days are gone, and parks, museums and night life have arrived. Just don’t tell anyone you took the Pablo Escobar tour.” All of this contrasts to the 1990s, when, the author explains, “you travelled to the largest cocaine-producing city in the world in the same manner that you lowered yourself into a tank of feral hogs” (Alford, 2013). It is easy to imagine the Juárez and El Paso investors fantasizing about similar endorsements once the feral hogs, aka cucarachas, are gone and tours are being arranged for visiting favorite narcoclubs and killing grounds. After gentrification scrubs the blood stains from the streets and sweeps out the pestilence, there probably will be some way to generate tourist revenues and higher rents.

Moreover—and as with Medellín—the Ciudad Juárez downtown development plans fit into a larger American securitization strategy that receives massive funding from the US government, as part of Plan Mérida. In 2011 the Plan shifted more support to Mexico’s border policing departments such as the one headed by Leyzaola. The Plan is part of a larger strategy devised by the three North American governments in support of neoliberal policies that prioritize securing borders against the easy mobility of workers and driving immigrants into smuggling economies while easing the flow of commerce across the same borders (Andreas, 2000; Coleman, 2007; Heyman, 2009; Sundberg, 2011). The effect is to weaken workers and make them more vulnerable to exploitation while facilitating capital accumulation across the North American continent.

Yet, while these events demonstrate why I turn to Smith’s analysis, I rely heavily on the feminist and poststructuralist scholarship, much of it from a Marxist perspective, that has shown how strict Marxist approaches fail to account for the multiple social dynamics, including social reproduction and production, through which capitalism and resistance to it come to life (Cahill, 2007; Gilmore, 2007; Katz, 2001; McDowell, 2009; Massaro and
As Cindi Katz writes, “After more than 30 years of Marxist–feminist interventions around these issues, symptomatic silences around social reproduction remain all too common in analyses of capitalism. ... The scale of dispossession is witnessed not just in uneven geographical developments like colonialism, gentrification, suburbanization, or ‘urban renewal,’ but also at the intimate scales of everyday life. Foreclosure takes place—quite literally—at the very heart of people’s existence” (2011, pages 49–50).

And Ciudad Juárez offers an excellent case in point. For binding the gentrification plan to an effective accumulation strategy is the sinew of human beings who are struggling to reproduce their lives and their spaces in the city. Their efforts to remain in the city are efforts to survive against a powerful nexus of discursive and material processes that conspire to uproot them, as evidence of a better society, and generate profits through their disappearance. Thus, in order to demonstrate the class dynamics at play within the Ciudad Juárez gentrification plan, I join a growing body of feminist geographers that depict the intersections binding reproduction to production and materiality to discourse within economy, culture, family, politics, and so forth, as activists navigate overlapping intersections of power in their daily lives. This scholarship is also shaping new approaches in critical geography regarding violence and dispossession in everyday life, especially along borders and other sites vulnerable to securitization (see Cowen and Gilbert, 2008; Feldman et al, 2011; Loyd et al, 2012; Williams, 2011).

Certainly in Ciudad Juárez, the class warfare that I investigate takes shape through the discourses regarding multiple social differences and the resistance to these discourses as activists and investors butt heads over plans to ‘repopulate’ the downtown. For this reason, and as I intend to show in what follows, the story told by Leyzaola and other officials of cockroaches, delinquents, and narcotics represents a key technology that operates through tales of gender and youth for generating profitable plans for investment, through the violent dispossession and dispersal of the working poor, all in the spirit of a publicly funded North American security. Resistance to this technology is resistance to the intersection where misogyny, fear of male youth, and class violence meet.

I base this argument on years of studying the social movements against the twinning of discursive demonization and material exploitation of the city’s working poor, especially of the poor women and their families who have turned Ciudad Juárez into a global manufacturing hub. Regularly portrayed by political and economic elites as ‘whores’ (putas), the city’s working poor women have endured decades of socially denigrating discourses that justify their material exploitation and social vulnerability to violence (Nathan, 1999; Wright, 2006). Now, the stories of cockroaches, delinquents, and narcotics justify the same exploitation and vulnerability of their children. As noted by a prominent Mexican scholar and activist, Victor Quintana, the prevalent discourses that political–economic elites and their officials, such as Leyzaola, use to explain and justify the violence as ‘criminals killing criminals’ contribute directly to the victimization of the city’s working poor (Quintana, 2010). In a challenge to these elites, Quintana refers to the violence as “juvenicidio”, the killing of youth with impunity, youth whom he describes as: “the children of structural adjustment, of neoliberalism, of a minimalist state”, for whom “suicide and killing are the only options”.(2) With this statement, Quintana fashions ‘juvenicidio’ from the now infamous word feminicidio (femicide), a term that emerged, over the last twenty years, from the feminist social protests against the violence that has claimed hundreds of women’s lives in northern Mexico and against the state-sponsored impunity for the murderers (see also Monárez Fragoso, 2001). In coining ‘juvenicidio’ from ‘feminicidio’, Quintana exposes how state-sanctioned impunity for the violence, justified by

(2)I have translated: “los hijos de los ajustes estructurales, del neoliberalismo, del Estado mínimo. … el suicidio o la sicariada son las únicas opciones.”
stories of whores and of their offspring, provides a direct economic benefit to the elite who reap profit through the characterization of the city’s low-income residents as “disposable” (see also Wright, 2011). He therefore, and like so many antifemicide activists over the years, calls for resistance to these discourses that devalue poor women and their families as a way to arm a resistance against the reaping of profit from their killing (see Bejarano and Fregoso, 2010). In doing so, Quintana and the feminist activists do not deny the problems generated by an international drug trade, sexual trafficking and forced labor smuggling, so rampant along the border (see, for instance, Campbell, 2009; Ravelo, 2011). Rather, they focus on how these profitable enterprises flourish through the widespread stories told, time and again, that stigmatize working poor women and their families.

I present this argument in the following by contextualizing Leyzaola’s cockroach story within the efforts to dislodge the working poor over the last twenty years from the centro histórico along with the activism against this dispossession. To do this, I draw from a previous period of fieldwork, one conducted in the late 1990s with Dr Estela Madero, among sex workers in the centro as they fought to continue working on the streets during an intense round of urban planning initiated by the municipal government. In an earlier publication, I examined how this struggle occurred simultaneously with the political fight against feminicidio, when activists and families protested a governing discourse that blamed women for the violence, and in so doing disrupted a capitalist logic that reaped value from the devaluation of women as a social group (Wright, 2004). In subsequent years, and in the midst of our research team’s current collaborative field project, I have come to see a renewed relevance to this earlier field work for the current plans to gentrify the centro and secure North America around the violent dispossession of its working poor. Both periods, I believe, demonstrate the importance of renovating debates over the meaning of stories (and songs) about cucarachas, and their ilk, for Mexican democracy and global economies.

2 Planning out the prostitutes

In the mid-1990s urban political and economic elites, under the leadership of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) mayor’s office, inaugurated new plans for redeveloping the centro histórico. Elected to office under the banners of anticorruption and a return to traditional ‘values’, the socially conservative political leaders focused on the vice and what they called the “social deterioration” of the downtown. They worked with the newly created Institute for Municipal Planning (IMIP) to justify their ideas for ‘renovating’ the old city center (IMIP, 1998). A problem for this plan, however, was that the downtown was hopping. Especially during the mid-1990s maquiladoras were booming with two and three shifts as the western edges of the city expanded with working class families dominated by women and their children, who passed through the downtown daily. Even on poverty wages, they could stop by a taqueria or enjoy a bowl of soup in the Cuauhtemoc market; they could dance and drink micheladas (beer, lime, and chile); they could shop for clothes or toys for their kids at the outdoor stalls, or buy medicinal remedies and fresh Mennonite cheese from the Sierra; they could sell trinkets or used clothes in the informal markets, buy or sell sex and drugs on practically any street corner, or rub elbows with US teens skirting the Texas drinking laws.

Such had been life in downtown Ciudad Juárez since the mid-1970s, when young women migrated by the thousands, every year, to work in the maquila factories and to live in a city that offered them little in the way of housing, education, childcare, or entertainment. They scratched out homes in the ravines and crags of the mountainous desert terrain on the western flank of the old centro. Consequently, Ciudad Juárez developed notoriety for its

(3) Estela Madero was an invaluable research assistant on the project while she was completing her undergraduate degree at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.
female-headed households. And as these women walked the city streets at all hours, with or without male companionship, along with their children, the downtown opened up to them with discos, taquerias, stores, and other establishments. (Fernández-Kelly, 1984).

All of this activity posed several challenges to those who sought to redevelop the centro histórico. How could they convince the downtown businesses to sell their properties when business was so good? How could they convince the working poor to shop and dance and travel elsewhere when the downtown was so convenient and met multiple needs? How could they break the bonds linking the centro histórico to the city’s working poor, especially to the female-headed households that lived in the west and shopped in the centro?

In the 1990s the political leaders and their new planning institute, the IMIP, approached these issues in a way that had proven very effective in many parts of the world for dispossessing the working poor of the cities that reflected their wants and needs: they denounced them. Mainly, they pointed at the women on the streets, and at the prostitutes and the brothels, which had been in business since the 1920s (Sandoval and Peña, 2010), as evidence of the dangers that lead to the disintegration of good society based on traditional patriarchal families. In the plans for redesigning the centro, the planners linked prostitution to drugs and to the social disintegration of society, and sought to remedy this problem not by bringing life to a dead downtown, but by ridding the downtown of a certain kind of vice-ridden life and replacing it with a more wholesome and prosperous version (IMIP, 1998). The removal of sex workers, in other words, as has been the case in so many places around the world, indicated a cleansing of society as a first step toward removing the working poor from potentially valuable urban real estate.

This way of thinking was not unique to Ciudad Juárez, of course, and indeed had a counterpart in the contemporaneous and well-known example of Rudolph Giuliani’s strategy for achieving a similar goal in mid-town Manhattan. With his ‘quality-of-life initiative’ for renovating Times Square, Giuliani demonized the sex trade in the area and touted the ‘broken windows’ theory for policing minor infractions, such as jaywalking, prostitution, and loitering, as a means for improving public safety. While criticized for its racism and elitism by rights activists alongside people who lived and worked in mid-town Manhattan, Giuliani’s policy found support in the middle and upper classes, who did not feel comfortable in that part of the city. They welcomed Giuliani’s initiative to eliminate the sex shops from Times Square, criminalize homelessness, and push the working poor out of Times Square to make way for the ‘Disneyfication’ of 42nd Street. Similar aspirations propelled the new Ciudad Juárez development plan, which, like that of Times Square, blamed the sex trade for the city’s woes and hounded especially women working in that trade (Nathan, 1999).

When Estela Madero and I initiated a research project in April 1997 to study the livelihood strategies of sex workers in Ciudad Juárez, we were told by Brenda, the first prostitute who agreed to work with us, that the “real story” was that of the sex workers’ collective struggle against the efforts to remove them, as part of the development and cleansing plan. A few days before this first conversation with Brenda in 1997, she and her colleague, Ema, had met with the lieutenant in charge of policing in the downtown area. Police harassment of sex workers was up along the streets behind the market, where the women worked, and in the plaza in front of the Cathedral, where the men worked. After learning that several of her colleagues had been picked up by police agents, robbed of their earnings, and forced to perform oral sex on several officers, Brenda and Ema complained loudly enough in the police offices to force a meeting with the reluctant lieutenant. “We are poor, but we have rights!”, Ema said.

(4) I have translated: “orden y control necesarios que garantizaran su óptimo funcionamiento. Aunado a esto, la zona se encuentra en un deterioro físico, social y económico, lo que ha propiciado el incremento de actividades delictivas en ella” (IMIP, 1998).
Nearly all of the fifteen or so women who worked with Brenda and Ema in the 1990s behind the market were mothers, and they were typically older than their counterparts in the higher-rent areas of the downtown sex trade, ranging from twenty-five to forty-five years of age. Because they made so little per sex act (about $3 for fifteen minutes with a client), many of the women had side-businesses, such as the selling of used clothes or cheese or house-cleaning services. Brenda sold drugs to her coworkers: small packets of cocaine, heroin, and tranquilizers. “They need it for their work”, she said. Yet, while the work behind the market paid less per sex act than in other areas, the women who worked there spoke of their independence and relative safety. They controlled their time with the clients; they did not work for a pimp or pay part of their wages to the owner of a bar; they did not have to ride in anyone’s car or leave their work area. “We are mothers”, said Brenda, “we have to think about our safety.” Still, everyone spoke of the ongoing risks. “The men are abusive”, said another. In the previous year, one of their coworkers had been stabbed to death in the inn where they worked. After this murder, Brenda took a more active role in acting as a leader for her coworkers. “I have more experience here”, she said, “and my husband is a policeman.”

Brenda’s ‘husband’, who was legally married to another woman, was her drug supplier and the father of her three youngest children. Behind his back, Brenda usually referred to him as “mi poli” (“my cop”). In addition to her cop, Brenda had another client, “el profe” (“the professor”), whom she saw daily in the afternoon when her “poli” was working. Between her steady clients, including her poli, and the drugs she sold, she was saving to open a “tiendita”, a corner store, which was her plan for retiring from the sex trade. We watched how she managed this on the day when she recounted her visit with the lieutenant. As soon as we stepped off the bus from the downtown to her home, Brenda ducked inside, kicked off her heels, slid out of her black, low-cut dress, and stepped into a slip. She swept her long full hair into a twist that she clasped to the back of her head. “There”, she said, “if [the poli] comes by, I’m ready. He likes me to look like a housewife.” Her two-room house was full of people during this conversation: her three young children playing on their bunk beds and running around the kitchen table, under the eye of fourteen-year-old Sara. Estela and I sat on the edge of her double bed. Ema, her coworker who had gone with her to visit the police lieutenant, stepped through the door shortly after we arrived. She lived a few doors down.

According to Brenda, the conversation with the lieutenant had gone well, up to a point. He understood the problem, she explained, and said he would tell the officers to stop the abuse. “But then”, she exclaimed in exasperation, “Ema started talking about the constitution!” She pointed an accusing finger at her friend: “I’m not going with you again if you keep talking about the constitution.” Ema, a woman in her mid-forties, raised her hands as if in self-defense: “We have a right to work here. It’s in the constitution.” Brenda shook her head. She did not believe that the rights argument would go anywhere with a police chief who did not care about civil rights. Brenda believed that their leverage lay in their connections to the businesses—the bars and other shops—that relied on the commerce from the clients who sought sex on the street. She said, “He said there are people who want us out of the downtown.” I asked, “Does this have something to do with the renovation plan?” Brenda nodded, “Yes. They want us to move someplace else to work. But we will fight. The businesses will fight too. They need us.”

Within two weeks of this conversation, Brenda’s prediction that the businesses would fight the efforts to move the prostitutes out of downtown proved correct. A business owner there explained that they were under pressure to sell their businesses, but that there was no economic incentive to do so. The clients were not wealthy but they were steady, and business was good in large part because of the sex trade brought in by the women behind the market. The bar and brothel owners also had their own political clout. Most of them had exclusive
beer contracts with one of the wealthiest men in Ciudad Juárez, Federico de la Vega, who owned the Carta Blanca brewery. His brewery also held many of the liquor licenses for these businesses, which he bought from the city and then allowed the downtown businesses to use under the condition that they sell only Carta Blanca beers. De la Vega was a well-known PRI-ista, someone who supported the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) establishment (rather than the incumbent PAN-ista municipal administration and state governor) with his economic and political clout. His wife, Guadalupe de la Vega, had founded a nonprofit organisation that offered sex education, HIV prevention training, and microcredit for women and sex workers in downtown Ciudad Juárez, including among Brenda’s group. Her organization also lobbied for the right of the women to work without police abuse. Behind the fight between the sex workers and the police, therefore, was also the tension between the pro-PRI de la Vega family, including their civic and business networks, and the PAN government with its networks trying to make good on a campaign promise to “clean up” the centro by removing sex workers.

The local retailers’ resistance to selling, along with de la Vega’s political clout, added support to the sex workers’ struggle to stay in the centro, amid political–economic plans that valorized their removal. Yet police abuse continued, and the women felt economic strain in the loss of clients. Brenda’s steady client, ‘el profe’, was staying away until things calmed down, he said, and she was having to find others. This was hard to manage without her ‘poli’ finding out, but she needed the income. So, with her ‘poli’ as her supplier, she stepped up the drug business. One afternoon, we arrived at her house as Sara, her daughter, was filling small transparent plastic bags with spoonfuls of white powder, which she then folded and stapled. Her mother paid her a peso per bag. Dressed in the plaid skirt and white blouse of her school uniform, Sara was hoping to save the money for the tuition at a vocational school. And Brenda explained that if she had to start selling more drugs to pay for her daughter’s education she would do so, anything to keep her out of the maquilas and off the streets. With shifts in the logistics of the drug trade and the opening of a domestic consumer market for illegal narcotics, Brenda’s diversification strategy foreshadowed the political–economic trends that would lay the groundwork, ten years later, for the so-called ‘drug war’.

Simultaneous with the battles waged between the sex workers and the police behind the market, other battles brewed as women-led activism protested the lack of political and police attention to the violence that had claimed over a hundred women and girls since the early 1990s. In 1994, feminist activists and women-led organizations formed the city’s first feminist coalition, La Coordinadora de Organizaciones no-Gubernamentales en Pro de La Mujer, and held press conferences, public protests, and marches to generate domestic and international attention to the violence and its connection to the exploitation of cheap labor in the maquiladoras, inadequate public funding of infrastructure to meet the needs of the city’s poor, and political corruption (Pérez García, 1999). In response to the activism the mayor’s office, police officials, and the state governor attempted to downplay the violence as ‘normal’ for a city like Juárez, one with so many women who worked in prostitution and lived ‘double lives’ (doble vidas) as factory workers by day and whores by night (Nathan, 1999; Wright, 2006). Again, and just as in the case of Brenda and her colleagues, a discourse of sex workers as dangerous for society not only dismissed the violence as ‘normal’ but also, when taken to its logical conclusion, justified the violent disappearance of women and girls from urban space. The feminist-led activist coalition attacked this interpretation of girls and women in public space—as evidence of trouble—by declaring that the women on Ciudad Juárez’s streets were hijas, the working daughters of the Juarense families who fueled the city’s globalized economy. And, in fighting against the discourse of female trouble, they fought against the strategies for deriving value from their removal from urban space. By the end of the 1990s
Ciudad Juárez activists had come to call the violence ‘feminicidio’, a term borrowed from feminist scholarship as a way to turn attention to the context of impunity that normalized the killing of women and blamed the victims instead of their murderers (Monárrez Fragosos, 2001).

With this feminist politics against feminicidio—and the discourses that justified the brutalization of women—the activists generated international media coverage and scrutiny from academics and transnational activists, and from artists and political committees within and beyond Mexico, which all critiqued the ‘doble vida’ discourse used by political and corporate officials to normalize and even valorize the violence. As news of the violence spread, the police, political leaders, maquiladora managers, and urban planners came under attack around the world as complicit in the violence that preyed upon the vulnerable population of maquiladora workers and their families that lived in inadequate housing and in extreme poverty. And their development plans, along with the public cleansing of the centro, stalled. By the end of the decade, the PAN party that had dominated both state and municipal offices for most of the 1990s was under attack also by candidates from the PRI party, who promised to resolve the crimes and restore public safety (although they did not fulfill this promise). With the violence dominating headlines, the PAN lost the state governor’s office in 1998, and while the incumbent municipal party held on to the mayor’s office, its political clout had been weakened by the urban protests, and the new administration was on the constant defensive against charges of incompetence and impunity in relation to feminicidio.

As support for the gentrification plan waned among investors, local business leaders blamed the antifemicide activists for tarnishing the city’s reputation and business climate. When in 2001, following the discovery of eight female corpses in the city, activists designed a cross with images and nails representing the victims and erected it in the heart of the downtown, business leaders called for its immediate removal on the basis that it was bad for business. But the activists prevailed in generating international outrage and pressure against feminicidio and for the cross, as transnational activism spread awareness of the fight against feminicidio around the world. Within the country, however, criticisms of the activists grew as the global recession and loss of maquiladora facilities to China in the early 2000s damaged the city’s industrial base, causing unemployment to rise. While the corporate and political elite certainly gave too much credit to the activists for the effects of a global recession and the influence of China on corporate location strategies, their hostility toward the activists revealed that the latter were disrupting business as usual in the city (Wright, 2004). Meanwhile, and amid the ongoing wars over the meaning of women on the street, Brenda and her colleagues were still walking, working, and dealing with police abuse, while the working poor of Ciudad Juárez continued shopping, dancing, and generally hanging out in the centro. The campaign to dispossess the working women of the centro failed as these women constantly proved their worth to the economy, society, and culture of the city.

3 *La ley de Leyzaola (Leyzaola’s law)*

Yet, as has been shown time and again, capitalism is nothing if not relentless, and, true to form, the venture capitalists whose eyes were locked onto the potentially prime real estate of downtown Ciudad Juárez were not abandoning their plans for dispossession. Over the next few years investors regrouped under a different political party, shifting from the PAN municipal government to a PRI one, with a number of different financial backers, and with an even more ambitious set of ideas for renovating the downtown. The new plan, partially unveiled in 2007, would not gain steam until 2009, a year after the economic crisis hit global...
markets and one year after the federal army arrived to take over the city’s policing. As massive unemployment, extortion, unprecedented violence, and further government restriction in public spending further impoverished and marginalized the city’s working poor, the centro histórico began, finally, to resemble in material space what the elite had only been able to envision in their plans. The centro histórico started to die along with the working poor that had been its lifeblood over the last century. And when this dying had reached a formerly unimaginable apex, Leyzaola initiated his strategy for exterminating the cucarachas.

A few months before the army arrived in 2008, the municipal government, in collaboration with private investors, energized another development project for downtown Ciudad Juárez that was much more ambitious than the previous plan but that, similarly, envisioned a social cleansing of the downtown as a preliminary step for recapitalization (IMIP, 1998). This project detailed several phases beginning with the buying of properties, either through voluntary exchanges or through eminent domain enforcement, and then the demolition of commercial and residential properties on the western edge of the downtown to clear the way for the new structures. Numerous establishments were demolished, some after having been sold through the government’s enforcement of eminent domain, but with the global economic crisis that hit real estate investors especially hard in 2008 and 2009, the renovation plan came to a halt. By 2010 dozens of buildings lay in ruins, and the downtown, as one business leader described it, looked “bombed out” (Carrasco, 2012a). Meanwhile, unemployment, especially among youth, soared, and the violence worsened, particularly in the years when the federal troops and then federal police oversaw the city’s security. In 2010, after two years of federal policing, the per capita violence rate outpaced any city in the world and broke all Mexican records since the Revolution. Adding to the violence and unemployment, the city experienced a spike in extortions of small businesses, whose owners and clients faced increased risk of kidnapping. The extraordinary convergence of unemployment, extortion that targeted small and medium-sized businesses, kidnappings, and the unprecedented murder rate took a devastating social toll. Between 2008 and 2010 an estimated 25% of the population had left the city; 120,000 jobs had been lost; over 6000 businesses had closed; and a quarter of the city’s housing stock sat empty. As one financial paper put it, “after three years of escalating violence and disappearing jobs, this once-thriving industrial city no longer seems like an extension of El Paso, Texas, its neighbor across the border. In fact, it’s feeling more like a war zone. … The city’s main commercial corridors have been gutted, restaurants, dance clubs and pool halls have been firebombed and hundreds of homes have been abandoned. American tourists, who used to make the 10-minute trip over the border in droves to party and shop, are now a rare sight” (Schmall, 2010).

Yet, in the midst of daily devastation, political and economic elites on both sides of the border determined that the time was ripe for a new urban project on an even grander scale than in previous iterations. Then they hired Leyzaola. When he arrived in 2011, the downtown was indeed full of unemployed working poor, the majority of whom were youth, who now provided cheap labor for the booming domestic and international market in smuggling and drug selling. Rival gangs increased their competition over turf in an informal economy that was providing the only opportunities of employment for the working poor’s youth. In early 2011 word on the street had it that the average pay for a ‘hit’ on the street ranged from forty to eighty US dollars, about double the pay for stealing a car and about half the amount for smuggling cocaine in one’s body cavities across the border. The average pay for a factory worker who could find a job was about one US dollar an hour. As one demographer put it, “It’s harder to find a job … and then there’s the violence” (Cave, 2011a). Meanwhile, the one group that actually increased in size from 2008 to 2011 in Ciudad Juárez was that of female-headed households, as men disappeared through violent death
and arrest (Cave, 2011a). Immediately upon his arrival, Leyzaola announced his plan for securing the city, sector by sector, through an intensification of police foot patrols and with a ‘broken windows’ approach that regarded small-time criminals as the tip of a larger criminal iceberg. He began in the centro. Like his federal predecessors, he has continued the high rate of arrests of youth in the area, as his officers regularly round up young men, handcuff them, load them in the back of pickup trucks, and haul them away. Thousands of young men have been arrested in this way since 2008. In the first four months of his campaign, the police detained 10,343 people, arresting 344 people daily on average (Ortega Lozano, 2012). This number doubled the figures from the previous months. By the end of 2011 over 4% of the city’s total population had been arrested in that calendar year; over 8% of the population of young men between 15 and 29 had been detained, and this group represented almost 30% of all of those arrested (Ortega Lozano, 2012). The Chihuahua State Human Rights Commission issued a report concluding that in 2011 more than 20% of the Juarense population had, at one time, been arrested (2012).

In addition to Leyzaola’s intensification of local policing and detentions in the centro, the federal police, who answer to a different commander, continued their practice of summary arrests. On just one day in July, 2011, over 1000 people, most of them poor youth, were arrested by federal and state police in the downtown as part of a coordinated effort to crack down on the sexual trafficking of minors. They combed through brothels, restaurants, and cantinas; in addition to the over 1000 detained, they found about one dozen minors working, allegedly, in the sex trade (Castillo and Villapalndo, 2011). Between the municipal and federal operations, an increasingly common sight in downtown Ciudad Juárez, in front of the Cathedral and original town plaza, in front of the discos along Avenida Juárez, behind the Cuauhtemoc market, or in front of the old elementary school, is that of federal and municipal police pickup trucks filled to capacity with teenage boys and young men handcuffed under the watch of armed police—some pointing their AK-47 rifles at the youths and some pointing their weapons at the surrounding population. On a sunny afternoon in 2011, Juanita Sundberg and I watched such a scene, as federal police swarmed through the downtown in front of the Cathedral and young men ran in all directions to avoid them. One officer managed to eat a chocolate ice cream cone held in his left hand, as he dragged, with his right, a teen by his bound wrists and toward a pickup loaded with other teens, hands bound, hunched over, and sweating under a brutal sun, while another officer pointed his AK-47 at them. This scene evoked for me the many times that the state has done the bidding of capital, as discursive technologies justify the public brutalization of particular subjectivities around the idea of a valuable social cleansing. From Nazi Germany and Hutu-dominated Rwanda to the ‘scorched earth’ policies of Guatemala and the contemporary setting of racially and class-divided US cities, the strategies of capital accumulation have materialized through the discourses aimed at foreclosing the social reproduction of specified populations (see Katz, 2001). As geographers Vanessa Massaro and Emma Mullaney explain in reference to the policing of black youth in today’s Philadelphia, “Through a discursive process, symbolic restraints are appended to bodies marked not only by race, but also age and class”, resulting in a violent targeting of young black males marginalized by racism and class hatred across urban spaces (2011, pages 597).

In Ciudad Juárez many have protested Leyzaola’s methods as anticonstitutional and as following the extrajudicial ‘ley de Leyzaola’ (Leyzaola law) (Castañón and Domínguez, 2012; Murillo, 2012). Others point to the mayor, Hector Murguía (commonly referred to as “Teto”), and label the policing strategy as “Tetoterrorismo” (Teto-terrorism), with Leyzaola being the henchman (Diario de Tijuana 2011). The Chihuahua State Human Rights Commission criticized the massive detentions and brutality exercised by the municipal police (El Proceso, 2012).
Civilian protestors, such as *Los Indignados*, have reported torture and abuse along with illegal detentions and searches. However, just like Giuliani in 1990s New York, Leyzaola has a strong basis of popular support among the more prosperous classes as he points to statistics indicating clear declines in murder rates, extortion, and kidnapping (Amaya, 2012). Ciudad Juárez, in 2012, like Tijuana in the last year of his tenure there, boasts calmer streets, and middle-class people feel safe enough to leave their homes and shop, go out to eat, and enjoy the city. Leyzaola has received international attention as the controversial mastermind of the city’s renewed peace—however tentative it may be (Cave, 2011b). And praise of his tactics hails from the US state department which, in line with the trigovernment securitization plan passed in 2009, notes the improvements in border security.

Yet, the so-called peace is not enjoyed by the city’s old downtown establishments that have been hit hard by the city’s plan to move out what remains of the working poor in the centro. The arrests, the violent deaths, and the economic desperation have decimated the downtown population, but those who remain continue to shop and hang out in the downtown. The businesses that allow this to happen have been targeted through various police raids, such as the ones that occurred in early May 2012, when the municipal police closed some fifty bars for noncompliance with any number of legal issues ranging from serving alcohol to minors to not posting liquor licenses. Rather than fine the businesses, which is usual practice, they closed them indefinitely. Immediately, business owners and their employees stormed into the municipal building and demanded a meeting with city officials. Many owners and employees explained to the press that everyone knew that they did not possess liquor licenses because the city had sold them to de la Vega, the owner of the Carta Blanca brewery, who only allowed businesses to operate with a license (just as the cantina owner had described to me fourteen years earlier in La Paz) if they exclusively sold his products. The city had condoned this practice by selling the licenses to de la Vega over several decades. In the last year, however, the de la Vegas publicly moved out of the city (and country) and established their residence in El Paso, as they declared Ciudad Juárez no longer safe enough for them, even with their bodyguards and gated neighborhood. By contrast, the city’s bar owners and employees do not have such options, at least not legal ones, and, unlike the de la Vegas, who continue to earn tremendous revenues from their investments in Ciudad Juárez, the working poor have to show up in the city each day for work if they are going to make the revenues they need to survive. Such was the argument presented by the increasingly frustrated employees of the closed-down businesses as they waited on 19 May 2012, hour after hour, for someone in the municipal government to speak with them. Finally, tired of being ignored, two women who worked as dancers in one of the closed clubs began to perform a semi-striptease on the desks of the administrative assistants in the lobby. The assistants fled their desks, and a municipal official appeared. It seemed that women bearing their breasts created enough of a public safety concern to warrant some official attention. Once the mayor’s official appeared, these women used the politics of gender and sexuality in order to articulate a politics of class. As one newspaper reported, “The workers explained that they are confronting a very difficult economic situation, that they have children who barely have enough to eat” (Carrasco, 2012b).

In response to the protest the governor, Cesár Duarte, explained that these police measures for cleaning up the city will continue. “This operation [raiding the cantinas and brothels] will serve all Juarenses by establishing a new image of the city, leaving aside the stigma

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(6) I have summarized and translated from the following quote: “Las trabajadoras expresaron que enfrentan una muy difícil situación económica, que tienen a sus hijos casi sin comer pues viven al día y ya llevan viernes, sábado, domingo, lunes y martes sin laborar y no se ve para cuándo reabran los negocios.”
of violence and corruption that has characterized this place for years.” (7) Simultaneous to this initiative, Leyzaola stepped up his arrest of the informal vendors who sold clothes, electronics, pirated CDs, and any number of goods from their stands and carts, and whom he characterized as fronts for organized crime and general delinquency. The vendors protested this characterization and claimed that Leyzaola was harassing them because they refused to leave the downtown (Castañón and Domínguez, 2012). In other words, disemploying the working poor, such as the mothers who live in the centro day-to-day and work in the clubs and the young men who sell goods from moving carts, is the city’s preferred tactic for dealing with crime in a city suffering historically high levels of unemployment. And one month later the demolitions resumed in the centro amid government promises that numerous other buildings were slated for removal and with news of a potential 50 million dollar infusion from the Interamerican Development Bank in support of the renovation of the centro, along with ongoing support by domestic and public government funds. Building on the convention center is now scheduled. And the elite, backed by local political and transnational financial support along with the strategies of federal and local security forces for ‘cleaning up’ the downtown, finally, after over a decade of effort, are gaining ground in the centro against a working poor population that has been beaten down by unemployment, massive arrest, and violence. Downtown Ciudad Juárez is now ripe for new investment. Its proposed gentrification is not that of a dying city but of a murdered one.

4 Conclusion
Critical geography, with its roots in feminism and Marxism, where poststructuralism meets grounded research, has the tools for exposing the synergy of language and politics, of symbol and material, of reproduction and production at the heart of the life-and-death struggles shaping the Ciudad Juárez centro. These events take root, to borrow Katz’s words, “in the intimate spaces of everyday life”. Those are the places where the discursive struggles at the heart of social reproduction meet with the technologies for exacting another round of capital accumulation. The city’s gentrification certainly entails, as Smith puts it, “the class remake of the central urban landscape” as “a consummate expression of neoliberal urbanism” across the globe (Smith, 2002, pages 446). Thus, this case of gentrification exposes how the intersection of discursive and material processes knits the embodiment of identity to the body of global capitalism, where social reproduction and production engage each other constantly.

For this reason, and as I have tried to show, the discourse of filthy whores connects directly to the one of filthy cockroaches in any number of ways. Both stories demonize the working poor, one by targeting working women and the other by targeting their children, and both justify the violent removal, even the extermination, of this population as a socially valuable task for cleansing the city and making it more attractive to investors, tourists, and wholesome families. As the 1990s case illustrates, resistance to feminicidio was resistance to the technologies that derive value from foreclosing the social reproduction of women workers. This battle was not only about their labor, even though it was a battle about the value of their labor. It was a battle about the meaning of their lives and deaths for the city. For when the women who worked behind the market in downtown Ciudad Juárez refused to disappear, literally and metaphorically, from the centro, they subverted an ambitious gentrification plan that counted on profiting from their disappearance.

Such is the scene now in the stories of cockroaches, narcos, and delinquents, in a city that represents the frontline of a North American securitization and neoliberal strategy. Just as Medellín now represents a ‘success’ story of Colombia’s drug war and US military

(7) I have translated: “Este acto debe de servir a los juarenses para replantear la nueva imagen de la ciudad, dejando de lado el estigma de violencia y corrupción que ha marcado por años a la localidad.”
funding, the Ciudad Juárez investors are counting on similar funding for their own schemes that derive value from the violent targeting of the urban poor. Yet, cries against ‘juvenicidio’ have not gained ground in the city, despite scattered protests against ‘La ley de Leyzaola’ and ‘Teto-terrorismo’. Now, more than ever, debates over the meaning of ‘la cucaracha’ are necessary for rattling the political–economic forces that seek to gain from their extermination. New verses can be added to the Revolutionary folksong ‘La Cucaracha’ to further the debate. Does the cockroach represent dead narcos? Or the youth of the future?

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