



Breaking the Silence: The Strange Case of an Eco-Cosmopolitan Chicana Detective

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the strange eco-cosmopolitan detective attributes of Ivon, the protagonist in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's 2005 novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*. Through this willful, queer, and feminist *mestiza* character, who continually trespasses and transgresses cultural borders, Gaspar de Alba challenges the standards of crime fiction in numerous ways, as argued in this paper. Moreover, she also manages to expose the transnational dimension of the exploitation, mistreatment, and even murder of women in Ciudad Juárez. Simultaneously, Ivon's eco-cosmopolitanism acknowledges how the expendability thinking of free trade that partly sanctions the murder of women, also results in the environmental degradation of, and the free flow of toxins and pollution in the border. Ultimately, Ivon's strange, eco-cosmopolitan investigative traits, serve as the tools to break the silence and start confronting the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez as well as the socio-environmental exploitation of the US-Mexico border region, fostering a positive socio-environmental change.

KEYWORDS: Eco-cosmopolitan stranger; Willfulness; Positive socio-environmental change; New *mestiza*; US-Mexico border; NAFTA; *Desert Blood*; Crime fiction.

“Silence like a cancer grows”
 (“The sound of Silence,” Simon and Garfunkel)

1. INTRODUCTION

Early this century, Alicia Gaspar de Alba published a novel on one of the most tragic situations for Mexican women in northern Mexico, that of the femi(ni)cides of Ciudad Juárez.¹ Femicide has been defined by Jill Radford as “the misogynous killing of women by men,” that is, the murder of women by men on the basis that the men think they are somehow superior and that their lives are more valuable than those of the women they murder, often even thinking they are entitled to murder them (1992: 3). Jane Caputi and Diana E.H. Russell claim that femicide

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is “the most extreme form of sexist terrorism, motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women” (1992: 15). Mexican politician and feminist anthropologist Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos goes as far as to claim that it is “a state crime” for, in her opinion, feminicides occur thanks to inaction, negligence, or even the complicity of the authorities (2010: xxiii). The border Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez has been witness to numerous unsolved feminicides since 1993. Young, brown, underprivileged, and often migrant women have been brutally raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered for unknown reasons by unknown people/men, and their bodies have often been found abandoned in the Chihuahua desert landscape. These brutal killings, nonetheless, have not received the public or political attention one would expect. Gaspar de Alba’s novel aims to break that silence.

In order to compose her novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005), Gaspar de Alba, an academic in Chicana/o Studies and English, chose crime fiction. She envisioned the novel as a way to reflect on these feminicides, “to offer some conjecture, based on research, based on what [she] know[s] about the place on the map” and in order to reach a wider, non-academic English-speaking public (Gaspar de Alba, 2005: vi). Not only did she decide to frame this tragedy as a detective story, but she also decided to choose quite an unusual character to undergo the investigation: Ivon Villa, a lesbian Chicana academic.

The narrative focuses mainly on Ivon’s investigation of the feminicides and their connection to patriarchy, misogyny, and global capital. Nevertheless, it also addresses other issues such as (same-sex) (intercountry) adoptions, the clash of traditional Mexican Catholic values with homosexuality, as well as the problem of the pollution and toxicity of the US-Mexico border area.² Concerning this latter aspect, the potential for positive socio-environmental change embodied in the strange eco-cosmopolitan detective character of the protagonist is of particular interest from an ecocritical perspective. Analyzing the characteristics of the eco-cosmopolitan stranger in the context of crime fiction not only expands ecocritical thought, but also contributes to the already existing theory on the figure of the “ecological detective,” which is “called upon to bear witness, diagnose, organise, protest, persuade, suffer, mourn, and act.” (Walton & Walton, 2018: 3).

In order to define and justify the relevance of Ivon becoming a strange eco-cosmopolitan Chicana detective it is necessary to elaborate three key aspects. In the first place, the strangeness of the protagonist needs to be spelled out. Ivon can be regarded as a stranger for she is, in the words of Vince Marotta “someone who disturbs the pre-existing social and cultural boundaries,” “a person who questions nearly everything that is taken for granted” by those at the border (2010: 108).³ Her strange, willful character becomes an indispensable trait not only for solving the crimes, but for attaining positive change in the land of feminicide. Secondly, her eco-cosmopolitan character is another key and quite unusual trait. On the one hand, Ivon is a cosmopolitan character who not only traverses physical borders continually (i.e., the US-Mexico border), but also cultural borders. Her *mestiza* character blends Anglo and

Mexican heritage, and she is determined to constantly question and challenge heteronormative, white hegemonic patriarchal ideas. On the other hand, she evidences the transnational dimension of the exploitation and mistreatment of women in Ciudad Juárez. Ivon moreover acknowledges the interconnection of the industrialization of the region with its growing environmental degradation, as well as the free flow of toxins and pollution on the border. This is precisely what defines her eco-cosmopolitanism. She has the capacity to “think beyond the boundaries of [her] own [culture, ethnicity, or nation] to a range of other sociocultural frameworks” that deconstruct and expose the reasons that cause the sanctioned pollution of the border region, connecting “both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange” (Heise, 2008: 60-1). Finally, her forced transformation into a –strange, eco-cosmopolitan– detective challenges the standards of the detective story formula in numerous ways, as I will discuss in detail in section 3. Ultimately, Ivon’s strange, eco-cosmopolitan investigative traits, serve as the tools to break the silence that surrounds not only these feminicides, but also the socio-environmental exploitation of the US-Mexico border region.

2. STRANGE AND WILLFUL: A TRESSPASSER AND A TRANSGRESSOR

Ivon becomes a strange (eco)cosmopolitan detective with a sharp socio-environmental awareness, a set of queering characteristics, and a willful attitude. Thanks to these unusual traits, she is able to expose and challenge the socio-environmental consequences derived from the interrelation of a set of social, political, and economic factors at national and transnational levels. Ivon not only challenges the standards of crime fiction but, as a stranger, she also defies traditional Chicana/o values as well as free trade. She already is a trespasser and a transgressor in her homeland before getting involved in the feminicides. Gloria Anzaldúa pointed out that Chicanas/os –same as any other inhabitants of the borderlands who are not white, regardless of “whether they possess documents or not” – are often deemed by those in power as transgressors and aliens (Anzaldúa, 2012: 25-6). Moreover, Ivon is a Chicana lesbian contravening her culture’s tacit social and religious norms, as her mother’s homophobic attitude and comments towards her sexuality and lifestyle constantly remind her– by calling her “troquera”⁴ or referring to her lifestyle as “degenerate” (Gaspar de Alba, 2005: 130; 163).

Her position is even more precarious when she crosses over to the Mexican side of the border, where she is regarded as a *chola*, an Americanized Mexican: “*cholas* or lesbians. Either one was bad news in Juárez. As far as Mexicans were concerned, they were the same thing: traitors. As Americanized Mexicans spoiled by First World liberties and behaviors, *cholas* betrayed their own culture. Lesbians ... betrayed not just their culture, but their gender, their families, and their religion” (Gaspar de Alba, 2005: 134). Ivon, therefore, as a lesbian and a *chola* is regarded as a traitor in her border homeland. Conversely, as an academic on gender

studies –a multidisciplinary field often questioned in academia and society– she actively and continually exposes and confronts these attitudes, which deem her a stranger in her own homeland. Thus, Ivon fits Sara Ahmed’s definition of a “willful subject:” “Willfulness might be what we do when we are judged as being *not*, as not meeting the criteria for being human, for instance. Not to meet the criteria for human is often to be attached to other nots, not human as not being: not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied” (Ahmed, 2014: 15). In the context of the US-Mexico border, these characteristics, together with her constant confrontation of the discrimination she has to face, turn her into a stranger and a willful subject.⁵

Ahmed defines the stranger as a body out of place, “someone who is not from here, whose arrival is thus not only noticeable but potentially criminal” (2014: 124).⁶ Although Ivon was born on the border, her nine-year absence from the region has alienated her from the constantly shifting border reality. Besides, her innate characteristics are not welcome in the traditionally conservative border mindset: a brown queer female body on the US side, a lesbian *chola* on the Mexican side. This is particularly noticeable when Ivon crosses into Mexico, as a *chola* trespasser who intends to stick her nose into the unsolved feminicides. Moreover, she challenges her parents and her culture’s social and religious norms in order to pursue her own will. Through her queer and feminist willful strangeness, she defies gender roles in all aspects of her life: She is married to another woman and wants to adopt a baby; she researches gender issues; she constantly confronts male commands and patriarchal impositions; and she investigates what very few dare to investigate, the kidnapping and murder of other willful women. These other willful women challenge traditional gender roles and public spaces by getting jobs at the *maquiladoras* –*maquilas* for short– and wandering around the city on their own.⁷ As a consequence of this supposed willfulness, they are objectified, and turned into clones –homogenized characters that lose their individual identities the moment they enter a *maquila*–, perceived as expendable goods, easy to replace (2005: 21).⁸

In the words of Irene Mata, “the novel attempts to connect the violence against young women to the ways the maquila industry turns female workers into objects to be exploited and discarded” (2005: 24). Gaspar de Alba stresses this fact by adding to her narrative the symbolism of pennies and nickels. These US coins are found in the bodies of the murdered women (in the novel), most of whom are *maquila* workers, signifying “the value of the victims in the corporate machine; the poor brown women who are the main target of these murders, are, in other words, as expendable as pennies in the border economy” (2005: v). In this context, even their fertility is regarded as potentially willful and therefore controlled and even curtailed. If they happen to get pregnant, they become a risk for the company’s profits –they might ask for maternity leave or suffer from complications that might not allow them to fulfil their quota. Moreover, these willful women can become prospective “willful migrants,” “those migrants whose proximity is read as ill will” (Ahmed, 2014: 129). As such, they would threaten the

implied status quo of NAFTA –getting cheap products thanks to foreign cheap labor that stays abroad– by crossing the border illegally and giving birth to brown babies into US territory. The strict birth control at the *maquilas* and the murder of women in Juárez is interpreted by Ivon as a means to keep the female population in check, and inside Mexico, and to maximize the profit of female bodies under free trade (2005: 332).

Willfulness has traditionally been regarded as a negative trait, as a critique to someone who is confrontational and oppositional, supposedly for no good reason. Nevertheless, when referring to willfulness in the context of *Desert Blood*, the intended meaning is quite the opposite, in line with Ahmed’s vindication of the term. Willfulness is depicted as a necessary tool to expose and challenge oppressive patriarchal structures as well as economic practices with devastating socio-environmental consequences. Willfulness is thus not presented as a negative quality, although to be willful is certainly risky in a place where differing sexualities and diverging gender roles are systematically condemned and punished. *Maquiladora* female workers, for instance, by transgressing traditionally assigned gender roles when becoming independent workers outside the home, or becoming single mothers, are automatically portrayed as prostitutes. Thus, indispensable factory workers are deemed as “*maqui-lucas*,” “assumed to be *maquiladora* workers living *la vida loca*, ... coded language for prostitution” (Gaspar de Alba & Guzmán, 2010: 3; italics in original). Like *cholas*, they are moreover accused of being Americanized for abandoning the proper traditional Mexican gender roles assigned to women (Gaspar de Alba, 2005: 211; 252). In this side of the border being a willful trespasser seems to be a life-threatening risk –for numerous women portrayed as willful are murdered in Juárez. Simultaneously, it also seems the only way to positive change and, in the case of Ivon, the only means to solve the kidnapping of her sister Irene. In this sense, Ivon performs one of Ahmed’s maxims: “We have to enact the world we are aiming for” (2014: 170). Ivon, with her willful attitude, tries to enact a world of empowered, proactive women who confront injustices, threats, and oppression, becoming a strange eco-cosmopolitan detective in the way.

3. THE BORDER ECO-COSMOPOLITANISM OF THE NEW *MESTIZA*

Ivon’s cosmopolitanism is embodied in the queer Chicana border consciousness of someone who has been born and raised in the border. Moreover, as a willful brown queer who continually transgresses and trespasses cultural and ideological borders, she becomes a strange cosmopolitan character. Ivon blurs social, cultural, and physical boundaries, making them “porous and unstable” and ultimately “problematic” (Marotta, 2010: 108). She is what Gloria Andaldúa would call *una atravesada*, *los atravesados* being “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome ... in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines

of the ‘normal’” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 25; see also Mata, 2010: 23). Ivon uses the traits that turn her into a stranger in her homeland (i.e., *mestiza*, queer, *chola*, willful) as her tools to contextualize, deconstruct, and challenge the status quo that sanctions the feminicides in the border region.

Mata defines Ivon as “a complex character whose story traverses an intricate web of transnational structures of power.” She argues that Ivon’s oppositional thinking –which decenters heteronormative, white hegemonic patriarchal views– is derived from Ivon’s identification as a “border crosser,” referring to Anzaldúa’s theorization of “the new *mestiza* consciousness... a consciousness of the Borderlands” (Mata, 2010: 17, 23; Anzaldúa, 2012: 99). The new *mestiza* challenges binary thinking as well as established concepts and ideas, “inhabiting” several cultures at once – “[n]either eagle nor serpent, but both” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 84)–, while transgressing all and striving for a new consciousness. Ivon does not achieve all of this merely by being a Chicana lesbian who crosses the border back and forth during her investigation. Her subversion lies in her outspoken critical, oppositional, willful thinking, able to acknowledge the connections between local, regional, national, and transnational dimensions. Moreover, as a researcher “[t]rained in cultural studies, Ivon always looked for the historical and cultural context” (Gaspar de Alba, 2005:118). In order to understand and to put into context what is happening to women in Juárez, Ivon realizes that she needs to understand what is going on in the border region. Ivon’s summary of the current affairs of the border manifests her cosmopolitan awareness while pointing to several key issues related to the social and environmental degradation of the border: from gender violence in Juárez to the toxic nuclear pollution of the border or the tensions around politics and immigration policies (2005: 118-9).

Ivon’s cosmopolitan awareness discloses that the murder of women in Juárez is not a local, or even a Mexican problem. Her growing knowledge of the border informs her interpretation of the feminicides, as in her interpretation of the different graffiti she encounters along the story. This is the case with the rewriting of Porfirio Díaz’ famous saying “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States” into “Poor Juárez, so close to Hell, so far from Jesus.” Ivon interprets it as summarizing in only one sentence “[v]iolence against women, the economic exploitation of the border, even the politics of religion” (2005: 98). With her interpretation, she acknowledges how Juárez has certainly become hell to any underprivileged, brown woman living there or visiting the city. This is due to the high probability for these women of suffering an aggression, and the brutal ways in which such women are raped and murdered with total impunity. She also sees a reference in the graffiti to Juárez’ hellish labor conditions, derived from transnational labor and trade agreements, producing such “terror of the machine” among the workers (Peña).⁹ Finally, there is the politics of religion, namely Catholicism –personified in the statue of Christ the Redeemer, which reigns “so far,” over the US side of the border, at the top of Mount Cristo Rey. These politics condemn

Mexican women to fulfil strict gender roles of chastity, self-sacrifice, and submission to men. This is required in order not to fall on the ‘whore side’ of the *virgen-puta* (virgin/whore) dichotomy –that is, not to be considered *cholas* or *maqui-locas*.¹⁰ Therefore, Ivon connects the socio-economic dimension of NAFTA to the exploitation of female workers and the submission of women under the Mexican Catholic tradition. The combination of these factors results in the brutal, unpunished murder of numerous women. The murder of these women, who have become “expendable as pennies,” is acknowledged in the novel as part of “the price of ‘free trade’” (2005: 332). When a penny is found in the throat of a murdered woman during a *rastreo* –a body search– one of the participants claims “It’s like Abe Lincoln’s been shoved down her throat.” To this, Ivon’s cousin Ximena and Ivon add “[j]ust like the *maquilas* themselves have been shoved down Mexico’s throat...because of NAFTA” (2005: 250; 252). But it is not only young, underprivileged, brown women who are being sacrificed in the name of transnational economic progress; the border environment, as Ivon’s investigation discloses, is also subjugated, exploited, and violated.

Ivon’s critical, non-conforming, strange, and willful investigative character, gets her to acknowledge the repercussions of the “expendability thinking” of free trade beyond the murder of women, to the degradation of the border region. Imelda Martín-Junquera, in her ecofeminist analysis of *Desert Blood*, highlights the industrial exploitation of Juárez’ arid landscape, drawing a link between the perceived barrenness of the desert and that of the disposable, murdered women: “The ‘maquila’ plants rape the desert, and the murderers equate the barrenness of the desert landscape with that of the women they abandon there, ... once the penny has been expended, they dispose of their bodies which in death are as worthless as the desert itself” (2012: 248). Both women and the desert environment are thus barren and worthless in the eyes of the murderers, who, in the novel, also happen to have direct links with the *maquiladoras* that exploit both the land and their female workers. The extent of that exploitation, though, same as the murders of women, transcend the fictional dimension.

Ivon’s claims, although fictionalized, refer to the grim reality of the border. Devon Peña already questions the impact of the *maquiladora* industry, how it degrades the health of life-forms and undermines life-support systems in the border environment, in his pre-NAFTA critical study (1997: 293). Peña claims that back in the early 90s “Maquilas generate[d] at least one third of the total waste discharge flowing into some border waterways. This [was] the case with ... the Rio Grande downstream from El Paso ... Raw sewage and nonpoint sources account[ed] for most of the remaining two thirds of these total discharges. Moreover, pollution from the maquilas introduce[d] new chemicals that had not been present in the toxic brew” (1997: 291-2).¹¹ The border has been facing, for over three decades, two key socio-environmental problems as a direct consequence of industrial malpractices: raw sewage and toxic pollution. The expansion of the *maquilas* has meant rapid demographic growth which the city of Juárez has been unable to assimilate properly. As it is explained in the novel, most

maquila workers happen to live in *colonias*, squatter colonies or shantytowns, described as “black hole[s] of danger” (2005: 22), shabby, trash-strewn places where “shacks were made of wooden pallets and old tires, corrugated tin roofs,” without a proper sewer system (2005: 35-6; 238).¹² Raw sewage, therefore, is another dire consequence of the maldevelopment derived from the *maquiladora* industry. Thus, as Ivon notes in the novel, the Rio Grande “stunk of sewer. Beer cans and human feces floated in the black water” (2005: 141). The other key border problem, chemical, toxic pollution, is mentioned early in the novel, when Ivon notices the smog “hovering over the border ... a heavy brown pall that stretched across the valley. Toxic fumes from ASARCO[’s smelter]” (2005: 27).¹³ ASARCO –located in the US side of the border but owned by Grupo México, a transnational conglomerate– is good proof of the fluidity of industrial malpractices and of toxicity in the border region (Mata, 2010: 33). She moreover refers to the river water in front of ASARCO as “refinery-polluted water” where, nonetheless, people from the *colonias*, lacking proper public infrastructures –including running water– used to play and bathe (2005: 330).

Ivon takes the toxicity and degradation of the border region closer to home when she recalls the terrible fate of her great grandparents, Tata Alberto and Granny Rosemary. Due to financial difficulties, Ivon’s great grandparents had to move to Smelertown –ASARCO’s company town– until it was condemned, then move to nearby Calavera where the air “smelled of refinery soot and chemical fumes” (2005: 155; 295).¹⁴ That was “the place that gave him stomach cancer and killed Granny Rosemary with tuberculosis” (2005: 295). Toxicity –presumably causing his great grandfather’s cancer– and poverty –for tuberculosis is a disease often related to poverty and insalubrious conditions– go hand in hand, this time, in the US side of the border. A place where, years later “[t]he ground was [still] covered with mounds of thick black soot, and the chemical fumes were so strong that made [Ivon’s] eyes water,” where “the refinery smokestacks stood like sentinels of death” (2005: 295). Not coincidentally, this extremely degraded, toxic, and deadly place also happens to be the setting of some of the feminicides in the novel. Gaspar de Alba thus parallels the atrocious acts committed against the integrity of female bodies with the execrable industrial malpractices sanctioned by free trade in the US-Mexico border region. As a consequence of the deep socio-environmental degradation of the border, the El Paso-Juárez region is presented towards the end of the novel as “the dumping ground of all forms of pollution,” literally and metaphorically (2005: 310). In contrast, once Irene has been saved and peace and order have been restored to Ivon’s life, Ivon notices that there is “[n]ot a trace of smog today. The desert air was so clear it looked innocent” (2005: 329). A hopeful tone to compensate, albeit fleetingly, the desperate, unresolved tragedy of most feminicides in Juárez and the related socio-environmental degradation.

Ivon thus exposes the transnational malpractices that sanction feminicides –“the social, political, economic, and cultural infrastructure in which the crimes were multiplying like *another form of toxic waste on the border*” (Gaspar de Alba & Guzmán, 2010: 6; my italics).

Moreover, she acknowledges that these same malpractices are the main cause of the extreme pollution and degradation of the border region. According to Ursula Heise, an eco-cosmopolitan awareness serves to unveil the political frameworks that sustain communities, making salient connections among peoples and environments (2008: 62). Likewise, an eco-cosmopolitan awareness, such as the one practiced by Ivon, serves to disclose the (trans)national disruptive forces that unsettle socio-environmental balance.

4. A STRANGE DETECTIVE: A LESBIAN SLEUTH TRESPASSING IN THE LAND OF FEMINICIDE

An indispensable trait that advances Ivon's growing awareness of border socio-environmental problems is her detective aptitude. In order to disclose the reasons behind the feminicides and the related socio-environmental degradation of the border region, and ultimately to save her sister, Ivon has to become an eco-cosmopolitan detective.¹⁵ Moreover, as a willful, lesbian, *mestiza* character, Ivon becomes quite a strange, unusual detective. As such, she seeks justice for other willful women, the murdered "working women who 'transgress' gendered public spaces" (Gaspar de Alba & Guzmán, 2010: 12).

Desert Blood fits into the detective story formula inasmuch as it follows quite a traditional structure: crimes are committed that force the protagonist to take action and start an investigation as a non-professional sleuth. Evidence is gathered and different leads are pursued in a very hostile, dangerous environment. Meanwhile, Irene's kidnapping is a pressing issue that adds tension and suspense to the plot. Moreover, the extreme violence of the crimes, the corruption of law enforcement institutions on both sides of the border, and the uneasy feeling of not knowing who to trust conveyed by the protagonist, give the story a hard-boiled tone. Nevertheless, this is far from being a traditional detective story. Firstly, Ivon does not fully fit the mold of the traditional sleuth or the hard-boiled gumshoe. Secondly, although the plot might at first seem to fit the whodunit structure, it turns out to be something else, that could better fit the mold of what Stefano Tani terms the "anti-detective novel" (1984: 112).

Ivon, a settled lesbian Chicana academic, mostly incarnates the opposite values of the stereotypical hard-boiled PI.¹⁷ Nevertheless, she does indulge in some hard-boiled vices, like having an affair with a former lover. Moreover, she is quite a loner. Even though she relies on (and sometimes suffers from the company of) her family –including her extended family, Chicana style– her willful strangeness often portrays her as an outsider even within her own family. Consequently, she ends up carrying out most of the investigation on her own. This is complemented with a noir feel derived from her visits to strip clubs and to some of the most dangerous *colonias* in Juárez. In line with the hard-boiled tradition, she also does things that are ethically and legally questionable, like engaging in the underground border economy

through an extralegal adoption. Nonetheless, Ivon's moral code, shaped by her Chicana, queer, feminist, and eco-cosmopolitan sensibilities, clashes with the primarily heteronormative and white hard-boiled tradition. Her profession, status, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity are therefore unusual for the genre. Two of these factors particularly stand out, the fact that she is a lesbian and that she is a Chicana. "[T]he 'simple' act of representation has complex effects," as Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones claim in *Detecting Agency*, "making the traditional 'other' of crime fiction the focus of the ... narrative... necessarily involves a politics of identity" (1999: 21). Certainly, becoming a racial minority lesbian detective in the early twenty-first century seems quite unusual, while it promises to open interesting new avenues in the detective genre.

As Ralph E. Rodríguez states in *Brown Gunshoes: Detective Fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity*, "[t]he emergence and proliferation of the Chicana/o detective novel in the last ... decades illuminate how Chicana/os grapple with feminism, homosexuality, *familia*, masculinity, mysticism, the nationalist subject, and U.S.-Mexico border relations" (2005: 2, italics in original). Ivon grapples with those issues as an overtly political Chicana lesbian character who constantly challenges ethnic and gender roles and stereotypes, with no interest in returning life to its status quo, as it is typical of crime fiction. Ivon wants to challenge and defeat the white heteronormative, patriarchal, misogynist, and capitalist system that she sees as the root cause of the border problems. Thus, Ivon is, in the words of Mata, "queering the detective genre" (2010: 22) while confronting "any racist, sexist, or homophobic ideologies the reader might harbor" (2010: 23). Ivon, therefore, makes quite a strange detective, and her appeal and potential to achieve positive socio-environmental change lies precisely there.

Concerning stylistic conventions, the story does not present the usual, and often preferred, first-person narrator of the hard-boiled formula. It uses instead a third-person narration interspersed with dialogues that mostly offers the subjective perspective of Ivon. A few chapters, though, narrate the experiences of other characters—such as the gruesome murder of an unnamed woman in the opening chapter, or Irene's ordeal after she is kidnapped. This opens up the story to the subjective perspective of some of the victims as well, which, provided the novel is based on real crimes, aims to produce a reaction on the readership, who is forced to witness the terrible suffering the kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered women have to go through. In the end, the central concern of the novel, in line with Adrienne E. Gavin's assertion about feminist crime fiction, "remains violence against women. Women are victims: captured, raped, murdered, butchered and ... dissected into evidence" (2010: 268). As Lorna Pérez states, it is through violence that the story enacts an ethics that forces the reader to confront the processes through which women are transformed into objects in Juárez (2015: 90). The women portrayed by corporations, authorities, and even society as cloned and disposable *maqui-locas* thus become suffering subjects. Moreover, "[i]n this novel, we cannot take easy comfort in the fiction," unlike with the typical hard-boiled narrative, "since the parts we most

want to be untrue –the torture, the deaths, the gratuitous and sadistic destruction of life– are precisely the parts of the novel that gesture toward truth” (2015: 92). Gaspar de Alba’s willful narrative offers no refuge.

On the other hand, Ivon is not merely looking for rapists and murderers in the border region, or for Irene’s kidnappers, she is also interested in disclosing a whole criminal system, a disclosure presented to the reader through Ivon’s own perception of the events and known facts. This is proof of the author’s interest in the concept of the antidetective novel –as she states in the acknowledgements– where the detective finds a “nonsolution, the ambiguous perception of reality from [his/her own] point of view” (Gaspar de Alba, 2005: 342-3; Tani, 1984: 112). This is, therefore, much more than a whodunit story: “Pornographers, gang members, serial killers, corrupt policemen, foreign nationals with a taste for hurting women, immigration officers protecting the homeland –what did it matter who killed them? *This wasn’t a case of ‘whodunit,’* but rather of who was allowing these crimes to happen? Whose interests were being served? Who was covering it up? Who was profiting from the deaths of all these women?” (2005: 333; my italics). In the process of saving her sister and shedding some light on the unsolved feminicides, Ivon not only uncovers the identity of some of the criminals. Through her investigation she also discloses, in an eco-cosmopolitan fashion, related issues, such as corporate and industrial malpractices sanctioned by free trade, and the consequential social and environmental degradation. Through Ivon’s eco-cosmopolitan detective aptitudes, *Desert Blood* is good proof of “How crime fiction theorises agency and responsibility [which] may be extended to consider questions of systemic and slow violence in a global context. What kind of justice can be enacted when antagonistic actors and agencies are no longer the ‘evil geniuses’ of classic detective fiction, but distant and oppressive corporate powers, outside regular theorisations of responsibility and the clutches of justice, or even the agencies of justice themselves?” (Walton & Walton, 2018: 3) This is mostly due to the fact that Gaspar de Alba, as other female novelists writing crime fiction, investigates the potential interconnection of patriarchy with more general offenses, other than that of the particular crime under scrutiny, through an established popular formula (Walton and Jones, 1999: 4). In the US-Mexico border those offenses translate into numerous unpunished feminicides, transnational corporate and industrial malpractices, and the socio-environmental degradation of the region on both sides of the border, all of which have been silenced for far too long. Ivon –the strange, eco-cosmopolitan detective– is the key to subverting these crimes.

5. CONCLUSION: SILENCE LIKE A CANCER GROWS

Ivon, as an unusual strange eco-cosmopolitan detective, fights something as bad as murder: silence. In a disclaimer, Gaspar de Alba clearly states that she “join[s] the ranks of those who

believe silence=death” (*Desert* vi). Thus, from Gaspar de Alba’s perspective, in order to start redressing the injustices committed in Ciudad Juárez and the border region it is necessary to voice the problems and make them as widely known as possible. As Judy Maloof states “[t]his book is an attempt to break the silence that allows for the murders to continue” (2006: 371). The same silence that sanctions the pollution and degradation of the border and its inhabitants.

Towards the end, Ivon listens to Simon and Garfunkel’s well-known song “The Sound of Silence,” and then reflects: “[a] huge malignant *tumor of silence*, meant to protect not the perpetrators, themselves, but the profit reaped by the handiwork of the perpetrators. A bilateral assembly line of perpetrators, from the actual agents of crime to the law enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements” (2005: 335; my italics). Ivon sees the border problems she has been fighting against as a metaphorical cancer that affects both sides of the border. It results in exploited and impoverished (mostly brown female) *maquila* workers crammed into miserable *colonias*; in abused women –many of whom end up being brutally assaulted and murdered–; as well as in extremely polluted water courses, real cancers, and environmental unhealth affecting those who cannot afford to live far enough from the resulting pollution of capitalist greed. All this is sanctioned by the silence of the authorities, and local and international media. Not coincidentally, the NGO working to stop the feminicides and to support the victims’ families in the novel is called “Contra el Silencio,” against the silence. Even Ivon, despite being “a native of that very border ... didn’t know a thing” about the crimes until she read about them in *Ms.* in her trip back home (2005: 3).¹⁷ She represents the largely unaware English-speaking population living in the neighboring country. A country that is not simply adjacent to the crimes that its citizens seem blissfully unaware of. Rather, the US is an accomplice to the socio-environmental degradation of the border, which results from industrial malpractices that pollute the region and are sanctioned by free-trade. Additionally, the US consumes most of the products assembled by exploited and mistreated female *maquila* workers, while the law enforcement body that polices the border—the Border Patrol—is linked to some of the femicides in the novel. The only sound –other than Ivon’s outspoken claims– that occasionally seems to break the unnerving silence manifesting what those in power do not want to hear/to be heard, is that of the whistling and screeching of trains, which at times sound “like a woman screaming,” which “loud sad whistle” impersonates Irene’s unheard voice in her nightmares, their sound the only sign of life in ASARCO’s toxic ghost town (144; 195; 295).

Ultimately, as Ivon acknowledges, it is “[n]o wonder the crimes had not been solved, nor would they ever be solved until someone with much more power than she, with nothing to lose or gain, brought this conspiracy out into the open” (335). Nevertheless, Ivon undervalues herself and her power to attain positive change as a strange, willful eco-cosmopolitan Chicana detective. After all, she manages to save her sister while disclosing the relationship between impoverished brown women, gender violence, labor exploitation, industrial malpractices, and

socio-environmental degradation under free trade. Her voice resounds like the trains' whistling and screeching, challenging not only the conventions of crime fiction, but also the pervasive silence that has sanctioned the feminicides as well as the related socio-environmental degradation of the border region for far too long. It is through Ivon's strange, eco-cosmopolitan-informed detective willfulness that the silence is broken. Gaspar de Alba thus demonstrates the value of eco-cosmopolitan strangers (in detective fiction and beyond) as key literary figures that can serve to disclose socio-environmental imbalances derived from complex, entangled (trans)national networks of power. Such disclosures, moreover, can function as potential mobilizers of readers' conscience by appealing to their sense of justice, fostering positive socio-environmental change.

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NOTES:

1. Femicide is also referred to as feminicide, a term introduced in academia in the 80s by Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos. She proposed the term as a way to differentiate it from the Spanish term *femicidio*, which "solely means the homicide of women" (2010: xv). By contrast, she claims that "*feminicide* is genocide against women, and it occurs when the historical conditions generate social practices that allow for violent attempts against the integrity, health, liberties, and lives of girls and women" (2010: xv-xvi, italics in original). See also Fregoso and Bejarano (2010). Along this article – except when quoting or rephrasing other academics and their preferred term– I use the term "feminicide," which is informed by Latin American critical feminist theory that results particularly adequate in the context of the brutal murders of women in Ciudad Juárez.
2. See López-Lozano, and Messmer for studies looking at the interrelation of gender, patriarchy, and globalization in the novel. See Mata for a study of the power of oppositional thinking in reading transnational structures of power on the US-Mexico border, as portrayed in the novel. For a critical analysis focusing on how the novel deals with intercountry adoptions see Jiroutová Kynčlová. For a study of how the novel attempts to implicate the reader ethically see Pérez. Concerning prior ecocritical analyses of the novel, see Martín Junquera for an ecofeminist reading and Ramirez-Dhoore for a study looking at issues of labor exploitation and socio-environmental justice, from a mythical perspective.
3. For more on the figure of the stranger see Bauman 1995; 1988-9; and Simmel 1964a; 1964b.
4. *Troquera* is a Spanglish term referring to the English word "trucker," which is spelled as it is pronounced phonetically in Spanish, with the final "-a" denoting that the word refers to a female noun,

following the morphological conventions of the Spanish language. The term is used pejoratively to refer to a lesbian with masculine traits.

5. For more on a gender perspective of the stranger as a willful subject in urban crime fiction see Rodríguez Álvarez, 2019.

6. For an extended study examining the relationship between strangers, embodiment, and community see Ahmed's *Strange Encounters* (2000).

7. *Maquiladoras* started to sprout in the northern Mexican border region in 1965 as a result of the Border Industrialization Program. With the introduction of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement, 1994-2020) the number of *maquiladoras* in the region increased exponentially. Nowadays, most *maquilas* assemble products for US corporations. Back in 1997 Devon Peña defined *maquiladoras* as “third-world versions of assembly-line mass production,” in his work *The Terror of the Machine* (1997: 6).

8. For a similar claim in a non-fiction work see Washington Valdez, 2006: 18.

9. By “the terror of the machine” Peña referred to the aversion of workers to assembly-line work due to its monotony and to the danger it poses to physical integrity, as well as to the managerial pressures that accompany the work as a way to ensure high productivity. He moreover claimed that “[Henry] Ford’s terror of the machine has come to the third world, where it manifests itself in a vastly unregulated and uncontrolled border industry that is rapidly transforming the *ecological*, economic, and political landscapes of Mexico’s northern border” (1997: 7, my italics). For information about the exploitation of female workers at *maquilas* see Gaspar de Alba (2010: 64).

10. For an elaboration of how Catholicism and the Mexican culture impose the *virgen/puta* dichotomy to women see Anzaldúa (2012, particularly pp. 38-40; 44-5; 49-53).

11. Peña explores connections between gender, *maquila* labor, and environmental degradation in the US-Mexico border in *The Terror of the Machine* (1997). Although he does not address feminicides in his pre-NAFTA evaluation, his work exposes the normalization of sexual and sexist harassment as a form of managerial control of female *maquila* workers. He moreover addresses the negative impact of *maquiladoras* in the border environment: “Maquilas send Mexico down the dangerous road to ecological and cultural degradation ... the signs of environmental degradation are plainly visible in every drop of water [interviewee *maquila* worker Juana Ortega] is afraid to drink because of pollution from chemical wastes and untreated sewage” (1997: 10). For more on the pre-NAFTA environmental degradation resulting from the *maquiladora* industry in the US-Mexico border see Peña’s chapter 9 (1997: 279-334).

12. The documentary *Maquilapolis* (Funari & de la Torre, 2006), is good proof of this. Through the testimonies of several *maquila* workers in Tijuana (Mexico), *Maquilapolis* shows the dire story of Mexico’s northern border: cities with a population that has grown suddenly and exponentially, with numerous areas that lack the means and the infrastructure to provide *maquila* workers with proper housing and basic public infrastructures.

13. ASARCO (American Smelting and Refining Company) had a smelter located in El Paso from 1899 till 1999. For more information see ASARCO. For information about the lawsuits in El Paso and other parts of the US against the company due to toxic pollution derived from its industrial activity see Snell (2006).

14. For more on the racial segregation and toxic pollution of real-life Smelertown see Villagran (2016).

15. Gaspar de Alba’s novel is not the only example of Chicana/o detective fiction starring unusual detectives. Other well-known examples are Rudolfo Anaya’s Sonny Baca series and Lucha Corpi’s Gloria Damasco mysteries series. For a related analysis of a Chicana eco-cosmopolitan and strange character in one of Corpi’s detective novels see Pérez Ramos.

16. For detailed accounts of the history of feminist crime fiction and female sleuths see Gavin and Kinsman. I would like to acknowledge the insightful comments of one of the blind peer reviewers regarding the hard-boiled characteristics of Ivon.

17. “*Ms.* was the first national magazine [in the US] to make feminist voices audible, feminist journalism tenable and a feminist worldview available to the public” (*Ms.*). The article mentioned in the novel “The Maquiladora Murders,” written by Sam Quiñones, was published by the magazine in the May/June issue 1998. It was thanks to this article that Gaspar de Alba, “a native of that very border, with family living on both sides of the Córdoba Bridge,” and an Associate Professor of Chicana/o Studies and English at the University of California-Los Angeles at the time when she published the novel, learned about the feminicides (Gaspar de Alba & Guzmán, 2010: 5).

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