



## Suffering— A Social Reality

Suffering brought on by structural evil makes demands of us. It demands that we<sup>1</sup> recognize the ways in which our collective decisions can create an increased likelihood that the most vulnerable among us will suffer and suffer mightily. Yet it likewise asks us to consider how we *see* the suffering of others.<sup>2</sup> How we perceive the suffering of others can make an enormous difference in whether we see, or not, its origins in social structures of human making.

When suffering is situated within a social, political ambit, as is done by liberation and political theologians (for example, M. Shawn Copeland, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Ivone Gebara, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jürgen Moltmann), then the public relevance of theology takes on flesh. Liberation and political theologies concern themselves not only with the hopes, pains, and fears of humanity, not only with the intellectual import of age old beliefs, but also with the current state of society and the world, the injustices present therein, and the suffering that results. In these articulations, theology continuously strives to be more self-aware and self-critical about the nature of its larger impact. Needless to say, this impact is understood not merely in terms of personal decisions but, just as importantly, in terms of the infrastructures we create—social, political, and economic—that give shape to our world. Consequently,

these theologies judge themselves based on their contribution to the furtherance of the reign of God in our social and political life, in this world as well as the next.

What is more, our souls weigh in the balance in our response to suffering. This statement reflects not only a personal truth, to be sure, but a social truth as well. How our communities respond to suffering matters. Through our collective choices, we can become more or less humane, more or less responsive to God's grace.

This book asserts that salvation is realized in the world, albeit partially, only when we act in a manner that makes the essential unity of the whole human community more visible. Said another way, community makes possible the realization of salvation. However, the Christian tradition has always affirmed the personal nature of salvation, a claim this book does not attempt to supplant. Nonetheless, an exclusively individual understanding of salvation distorts the meaning of the doctrine of salvation and is, in the end, inadequate. We must affirm both individual and social salvation. Liberation theologians, like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, have extended our understanding of sin to include social sin. If sin is both individual and social, then so must be salvation.

This first chapter argues that if we "read" the suffering of the femicide in a way that invites our critical awareness of how we appropriate unjust suffering, then we "see" more transparently the horrific evil of this collective and personal tragedy. In turn, the urgency of the question of salvation comes to the fore, a topic that I will begin to address in chapter 2.

In order to develop this claim, this chapter begins with a particularly horrific example of suffering, the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, precipitated by a wide array of social circumstances of complex origin. This first section attempts to understand what this phenomenon is, some of the reasons it came about, and what is at stake in our response. The femicide must be considered among the most physically violent assaults on the humanity of girls and women and consequently a frontal attack on God's salvific intention for all human beings, women and men alike. The next section attends to how this kind of suffering might be "read" so as to make clear the ways in which far too often the suffering of the most vulnerable—in this case poor, dark-skinned females—is presented as unavoidable and less affecting. It is too often depicted as an unfortunate, capricious happening, one far removed from social structures that we have a hand in sustaining if not creating. Third, this chapter engages in

a “reading” of the suffering brought on by the feminicide, a reading that encourages a more critical awareness of its larger significance. Finally, this chapter concludes with an acknowledgment of the ways in which this reading of the feminicide needs to go further. It must take our social imaginal world into account.

## Femicide in Ciudad Juárez

Gender-based violence against women has a long, tragic history. Social conflict, war, and societal change have been and continue to be waged on many fronts, particularly through violent acts against women’s bodies. Such violence has taken the form of sexual torture, rape, disappearances, and murder, to name but a few. Indeed, twentieth-century examples can be found in the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Vietnam, Argentina, Yugoslavia, El Salvador, Peru, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, Congo, and Mexico, among other countries. Gender-based violence has come under greater scrutiny in recent years due, in part, to the work of the Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice, which successfully argued before the “newly constituted International Criminal court (ICC) at the Hague”<sup>3</sup> that “Gender crimes are incidents of violence targeting or affecting women exclusively or disproportionately, not because the victims of such crimes are of a particular religion or race, but *because* they are women.”<sup>4</sup> As Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano have pointed out, the last decade of the twentieth century has seen a rise in such crimes.

Among feminist scholars of the law, the social sciences, and theology, as well as among feminist human rights activists, the terms *femicide* and *feminicide* have been used to refer to the murder of females because they are female. Frequently, scholars use these two terms interchangeably. Even so, as the discourse has evolved (and continues to evolve) distinctions between the two have emerged. Anthropologist and sociologist Marcela Lagarde has pointed out that *femicide* and *homicide* are synonyms, *femicide* specifying the murder of women. But the term *femicide* is insufficient to speak of the tragedy in Ciudad Juárez because, like homicide, it does not refer to systematic violence based on gendered power inequalities. Further, as Fregoso and Bejarano explicated, *femicide* is a term that has been developed by feminist scholars in the United States, especially by feminist sociologist Diana Russell.<sup>5</sup> Thus, discursively it reflects the movement of a concept from “its usage in the English-language (North) to a

Spanish-speaking (South) context.”<sup>6</sup> The term *feminicide* is taken from the Spanish *feminicidio*, a concept first documented in the Dominican Republic in the 1980s by feminist activists who used it in their campaign to bring violence against women to an end. Lagarde introduced this term into scholarly discourse in 1987. *Feminicidio*, and thus *feminicide*, linguistically reflects the way that the Spanish language creates a compound out of two terms with Latin roots, that is, *femina*, meaning “female,” and *caedo*, *caesum*, meaning “to kill,” with an *i* used to link them.<sup>7</sup>

My choice of the term *feminicide* reflects not only this history laid out by Fregoso and Bejarano but also their definition, which follows:

Building on the generic definition of *femicide* as “the murder of women and girls *because* they are female” [the definition advanced by Diana Russell], we define *feminicide* as the murders of women and girls founded on a gender power structure. Second, *feminicide* is gender-based violence that is both public and private, implicating both the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or state actors); it thus encompasses systematic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal violence. Third, *feminicide* is systemic violence rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities. In this sense, the focus of our analysis is not just on gender but also on the intersection of gender dynamics with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices in local as well as global contexts. Finally, our framing of the concept follows Lagarde’s critical human rights formulation of *feminicide* as a “crime against humanity.”<sup>8</sup>

According to this definition, *feminicide* builds on *femicide* but now includes the phenomenon of impunity for the perpetrators because the state is implicated, either explicitly or implicitly, and makes clear that this crime transpires on a large scale, that is, it is widespread and rooted in the structural inequalities that render some women and girls acutely vulnerable. To this I would add one further descriptor, namely, that the killings are exceptionally brutal and vicious, a point exemplified in the case of Ciudad Juárez and several of the other cases listed above.<sup>9</sup>

Most journalists and other investigators agree that the Ciudad Juárez *feminicides* began in 1993, with one of the first victims being identified as Alma Chavarría Fávila, who was brutally raped, anally and vaginally. Some journalists state that she was a five-year-old girl, while others claim she was a young woman. Her body revealed that she was severely beaten

and eventually murdered through strangulation.<sup>10</sup> In April of 2009, the *El Paso Times* reported that since 1993 more than six hundred girls and women have been tortured, raped, and murdered, most between the ages of ten and thirty. Many more are missing.<sup>11</sup> “Nearly all of the victims [have been] poor, young, and slender, with dark flowing hair and warm, reddish brown complexions.”<sup>12</sup>

Juárez, a city of over two million inhabitants, sits directly on the U.S.-Mexican border alongside El Paso, Texas. Only a fairly insignificant Rio Grande river separates the two cities. During the past sixteen years, repeated investigations (local, state, national, and international) into these murders by “the authorities” have ended in failure. One early telling example is found in the experience of forensics chief and criminologist Oscar Maynez Grijalva. He began his investigation of these crimes in 1994 only to have his reports consistently ignored by his superiors in the Chihuahua state attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado de Chihuahua). In time, his superiors instructed him to plant evidence to incriminate innocent men. When he refused, he began receiving threats and eventually was forced to resign.<sup>13</sup> Journalists, scholars, critics, and public officials have all offered a wide range of explanations for the feminicide, which collectively indicate conflicting possibilities.<sup>14</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso has posed a list of questions illustrating the spectrum of theories:

Are they committed by a single or multiple sex serial killers? By the police- and state-sponsored paramilitary groups? By the “Juniors” (sons of the elite)? By traffickers of illegal human organs? By an underground economy of pornography and snuff-films? By a satanic cult? By narcotraffickers? By unemployed men envious of women workers? By men expressing rage against poverty? By men threatened by changing sex roles? By abusive spouses or boyfriends?<sup>15</sup>

Fregoso has further noted that these widely divergent explanations have served to fuel the sense of terror and trauma that currently grip Juárez, making the people’s capacity to resist this evil far more difficult.



The following story of seventeen-year-old María Sagrario González Flores helps develop in some detail one example. Sagrario’s story is fairly typical

of the victims. In 1996 the González family moved from the interior state of Durango to the Juárez area in search of a better life. By 1998 Sagrario, along with her father, Jesús, and sister Guillermina, were employed at a maquiladora.<sup>16</sup> Managers at this plant had Sagrario change her shift to early morning from the overnight shift, which she, her father, and older sister had all shared. This meant that Sagrario would have to travel alone and leave home at 4:00 a.m. to make it to work on time. The poverty of the Gonzálezes forced them to live in an outer lying area of Juárez in a one-room home thrown together with tar paper and wood, a home without running water.

On April 16, 1998, Sagrario's shift ended at 3:00 p.m., yet at 10:00 p.m. she had not returned home. Frantic, Jesús took his oldest daughter, Guillermina, and the two went looking for Sagrario. They quickly figured out that she was not with her boyfriend, who at 10:00 p.m. was at the same maquiladora plant working his own shift. They went to the local jail in downtown Juárez seeking help from the Juárez police, asking that they commence a search for Sagrario. Jesús' request was met with a patronizing response and the suggestion that Sagrario had run off with her boyfriend. The police made it clear that they would do nothing in the effort to find Sagrario, even though over the previous five years Juárez had a rapidly growing list of missing young women who turned up tortured, raped, and dead.<sup>17</sup>

Having had no luck with the Juárez municipal police, Jesús González then sought help from the district attorney's office and the state police. These offices were charged with handling the investigations of the string of murdered young women in Juárez. But this office, too, rebuffed Jesús, claiming that he had to wait twenty-four hours before he could file a missing persons report. He argued that he was looking for his daughter alive, not dead, but to no avail. After checking the local area hospitals, Jesús and his son Juan began their own search for Sagrario along the path she typically traveled. Fairly quickly the family sought the help of neighbors, who organized themselves and began a search in the desert where other victims had been found.

After the family had been searching for two weeks, they learned that a body had been found in the desert area called Loma Blanca. Sagrario's mother, Paula, took her son Juan and went to the police station on May 1 to find that the young woman's body was clothed with a company smock with the name Sagrario embroidered on it. The murdered girl was indeed

Sagrario. She had been stabbed five times and strangled. Police thought that Sagrario had also likely been raped, but her body was too decomposed for them to make a definitive judgment.

To add further torment to the González family's anguish, the police claimed that Sagrario was murdered while living a *doble vida* ("double life"), earning a second salary selling herself as a prostitute to Juárez men, a preposterous accusation.<sup>18</sup> The family found it unbelievable that investigators would make such a statement. Many Juárez residents had a growing suspicion that the police, both municipal and state, were either directly involved in the murders or, at the very least, orchestrating a cover-up for the guilty parties. The family buried Sagrario's remains in a simple desert cemetery. They could not afford a casket or the 150 dollars required for a proper burial. They decorated the dirt mound of Sagrario's resting place with plastic flowers.<sup>19</sup>



This feminicide raises many searing issues and haunting questions. Scholars have just begun exploring and debating the various ways to interpret the "social identities of the victims and the meaning of their deaths"<sup>20</sup> as well as how to construct a meaningful cultural narrative of these brutal murders.

For the purpose of this chapter, I want to focus on how these killings represent an overt attack on female human beings, brown-skinned and economically poor. Not only were these girls and young women brutally murdered, but also, several of their bodies revealed a severed right breast and a left nipple bitten off. Other bodies were dismembered. Still others revealed a triangle carved into their backs with a knife or other sharp object or had a gang symbol carved on their backs. In at least one case, a woman's vagina was penetrated with a knife and then cut up into pieces; her mouth was cut up as well, both carved to resemble a "flower." Bodies of victims were left in public places as if to make an intentional and politically embarrassing statement.<sup>21</sup>

The killers could continue their brutality with ongoing impunity because a sufficient number of officials at every level of government had been corrupted. This has made the state complicit in these ongoing murders and guilty of crimes against humanity. Interrogations have revealed that some perpetrators kill girls and women as a sport, a competition to

see who could rape and kill the most girls and women, or as a way for drug cartels to mark their territory, or to “celebrate” successful drug runs across the border.<sup>22</sup> What this rather brief account makes evident is that we are not dealing strictly with the murdering of girls and women, an evil tragedy to be sure, but rather with a more heinous *ritualized* killing of girls and women.

This ritualized killing of girls and women undoubtedly reflects misogynistic and entrenched pathological proclivities on the part of the perpetrators. But it also represents something more: the logic of a patriarchal sociopolitical system; the attempt to construct and inscribe power hierarchies; a denial of the political existence of girls and women; and the use of girls’ and women’s bodies for asserting control.

First, it represents the most heinous logic of a patriarchal,<sup>23</sup> or better, kyriarchal<sup>24</sup> sociopolitical system. When, as in this case, the genitalia and breasts of the girls and women victims, the most overt corporeal symbols of female humanity, become the focal targets of the assault on these girls and women, and when these brutal killings are allowed to continue with impunity for over eighteen years, then this tragedy carries with it a much larger social significance. At the very least, we must acknowledge the presence of a social order that has given rise to practices that “result in the death and the devaluation of female lives.”<sup>25</sup> We must ask ourselves: What is the social condition that allows for the possibility of the proliferation of sexual violence? What are the roots of this condition? What keeps it vital and thriving? No doubt, the state and other major social institutions play a major role as they politically structure this social world.

Second, we need to recognize that the ritualized killing of girls and women is an extreme attempt to construct and inscribe power hierarchies. The perpetrators, through the act of killing, strive “to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation.”<sup>26</sup> These ritualized killings are a product of a social mindset that sees girls and women as subjects in need of kyriarchal control, in a world in which a kyriarchal mindset is uncritically assumed as “God-given,” as the way things are and are meant to be. This has led rather easily to females becoming the targets of economic exploitation in the maquiladoras of Juárez, which in turn serves to make the extermination of girls and women appear explicable and, tragically, less horrific. This layered subordination of girls and women rooted in a kyriarchal culture creates a devaluation of female lives.



The devaluation of female lives expresses itself in a number of ways. To be sure, it is evident in the brutal nature of the killings. However, it is perhaps more striking in the state-sanctioned terrorism of poor women that has taken hold in Mexico.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Mexico's legal system has served to promote violence against women within the private sphere. "Under current Mexican law, if injuries inflicted during interfamilial violence heal within fifteen days, the woman cannot file charges against her domestic partner; if the injuries heal after fifteen days but are not permanent, the aggressor is merely fined."<sup>28</sup>

Third, the state has created a system of investigation designed to remove the identity of the victims for the purpose of denying their political existence. Multiple investigations at every possible level of government (local, state, national, and international) have been intentionally compromised or botched. Evidence has been consistently mishandled, lost, or destroyed. In many cases, when a body is eventually found, it has been so decomposed that it is no longer possible to determine the details related to the murder. State agents, attorneys, journalists, activists, and others who have attempted to expose the truth of these killings have been threatened, assassinated, or have had a family member killed.<sup>29</sup> Thus, even in the wake of the deaths of the victims, the surviving family members have been denied the right to seek justice on behalf of their murdered daughter, sister, mother, or friend. The government itself is culpable of denying political standing to victims and their surviving family members.

Finally, the killers use girls and women's bodies for the purpose of asserting their unmitigated control of Juárez and beyond.

In fact, the various feminicides in Mexico make evident the exercise of power across the social spectrum: the power of the state over civil society; the rich over the poor; the white elite over racialized people; the old over the young; men over women. The feminicides constitute a novel kind of "dirty war," one waged by multiple forces against disposable female bodies. The women targeted in these unprecedented border feminicides represent the "stigmatized bodies," those "marked for death in drug wars and urban violence." . . . Feminicide in Juárez exposes the reality of overlapping power relations on gendered and racialized bodies as much as it clarifies the degree to which violence against women has been naturalized as a method of social control.<sup>30</sup>

Women's bodies are used to mark territory and demonstrate power. These killings are "politically motivated sexual violence" that is based on a kyriarchal culture and its attendant infrastructure.<sup>31</sup> As Diana Washington Valdez has noted: "There is no one in Mexico who can protect anyone who seeks to investigate this."<sup>32</sup> All of which points to the killers' use of fear, trauma, and ultimately social terror so as to control the territory and overpower any threat to the ongoing work of evil here.

This experience of evil has cut short the lives of victims and forever changed the lives of the remaining family members and friends. This experience of evil confronts us with an ongoing horror, an evil that is many evils. The list of evils includes not only the unjust murders but also their brutality; the erasure and denial of the political standing of victims and their families; the betrayal of a government that terrorizes rather than protects its people; a lingering social imagination that appears to accept that poor, young women are disposable; the seeming pedestrian view that female humanity matters much, much less. These are but some of the evils.<sup>33</sup>



How we regard suffering matters theologically. If the suffering of the femicide's victims and their families is seen as an aberration, as the tragic lot of an unfortunate handful of victims and their families, then the desire for release from this evil, that is, for healing from God, can be described as the journey of the directly affected individuals. Moreover, if the victims are somehow to blame for the onslaught of their suffering and murder, then their suffering can be reduced to the effect of their own personal sin. Indeed, religious and civil authorities have made just such an argument.<sup>34</sup> If, however, this horrific suffering is regarded as the by-product of social structures—economic, political, religious, cultural—then the drive for God's salvific grace needs to be seen as one we pursue socially, collectively.

The Juárez femicide provokes the question: How best to delineate this experience of suffering? On the one hand, we can no doubt analyze its social, political, and economic dimensions and develop an understanding of a wide range of factors that put the femicide's victims at high risk for great suffering. Indeed, we desperately need an analysis of our national and international infrastructures that leaves in plain sight the human collateral damage brought on by these structures. Even so, as

Rebecca Chopp warns, “Knowledge of suffering cannot be conveyed in pure facts and figures, reportings that objectify the suffering of countless persons. The horror of suffering is not only its immensity but the faces of anonymous victims who have little voice, let alone rights, in history.”<sup>35</sup> Analysis alone does not go far enough. On its own, analysis can offer a short-sighted picture, one that leaves us aware but not engaged.

On the other hand, the personal stories of pain, like that of María Sagrario González Flores, would likely leave us engaged but not responsible. We are genuinely moved by the account of her brutal death. We insist that it stop. Her tragic story carries the power to move us. Yet the interrelated social-political systems that create a middle-class lifestyle for some and structural violence for many are not transparent for us. We find it difficult to see, much less accept, the ways in which our middle-class “must-have” products lead to a world that is ultimately destructive for the most vulnerable among us, like Sagrario. “The dynamics and distribution of suffering are still poorly understood.”<sup>36</sup> So, as Robert McAfee Brown tells us, “The world that is satisfying to us is the same world that is utterly devastating to them,”<sup>37</sup> yet we still do not understand this connection well.

This leaves us with a dilemma. How do we “read” suffering, particularly that of the most vulnerable in our world? Why does our response to this question matter? What is at stake in our response to this question?

## **A Social-Suffering Hermeneutic**

There are assumptions implicit in the ways we typically, perhaps unreflectively, regard the pain of others. Far too often, suffering has been dichotomized in a way that separates the analysis of individual experience from that of the social experience of suffering. Conventional dichotomies keep separate “individual from social levels of analysis, health from social problems, representation from experience, suffering from intervention.”<sup>38</sup> When these common and accepted dichotomies frame the discussion of suffering, as is often so in “anthropology, social history, literary criticism, religious studies, and social medicine,” then we no longer can grasp with clarity either the ways in which human suffering is at once both collective and individual or that the ways of “experiencing pain and trauma can be both local and global.”<sup>39</sup> We need an approach to suffering that subverts these typical dichotomies.

Prior to the advent of liberation theologies in the late 1960s, theological discourse considered the question of suffering from the perspective of individual experience. Undoubtedly, one of the great contributions of liberation theologies has been to call our attention to unjust collective suffering in its many forms. However, the femicide today demands that we once again examine how we understand the interlocking nature of individual and collective suffering and why attention to this relationship is crucial.

To begin, we need to appreciate that our perception of widespread human suffering has been powerfully shaped by the media and the commercial interests behind it. The media presents human suffering to us after it has been spun, digested, and “packaged.” What results is human suffering as a commodity. “Packaged” images of suffering are presented so that they “appeal emotionally and morally.” They often spell trouble because human suffering comes to us “remade, thinned out, and distorted,” basically prepackaged in an essentialized, naturalized, or sentimentalized form, typically so that it serves some commercial purpose.<sup>40</sup> In the process, viewers become desensitized to and overwhelmed by serious suffering, yet grateful that it is not readily visible in their own neighborhoods, that it remains at a safe distance, physically and emotionally.

Today’s packaged images of suffering “produce moral fatigue, exhaustion of empathy, and political despair”<sup>41</sup> and are distributed globally. We the “consumers” of suffering are left feeling that there is far too much suffering; it is too complex to be readily understood and too complicated to alleviate. This undermines any attempt at creating more just structures. We can find ourselves unable to respond except, perhaps, by writing a check. It is as if we are in a catatonic state. My point is that powerful interests put forward seductive depictions of suffering that are anything but transparent. We need to recognize this and to discern these depictions for what they are. We need to become more critically aware of the commercial and political interests that drive the most ubiquitous depictions of suffering. They shape how we appropriate suffering, in other words, how we make sense of the suffering of others, the reason for their suffering, and our relationship to their suffering. Often this occurs subconsciously. And it matters because how we appropriate another’s suffering will, to a large degree, dictate our response. Packaged images of suffering, while skewed, do serve a constructive purpose. Without media depictions of others’ suffering, we would be far less able to identify

human needs and to develop compassionate responses to them. But this is insufficient.

We need to address ourselves to the angle taken in these depictions and how this angle has shaped our appropriation. Valid appropriations of human suffering are themselves complex to achieve. As the Kleinmans rightly observe, “To develop valid appropriations, we must first make sure that the biases of commercial emphasis on profit-making, the partisan agendas of political ideologies, and the narrow technical interests that serve primarily professional groups are understood and their influence controlled.”<sup>42</sup> For theologians, our commitment to distinguish valid appropriations of suffering matters greatly. The search for more valid appropriations is not an attempt to reduce suffering to a “common” experience but rather is an attempt to recognize the complexity of the distinctive ways suffering is understood.

Cognizant of this dilemma, some theorists and theologians (Paul Farmer, M. Shawn Copeland, Rebecca Chopp, and others) have sought means of delineating suffering in a fashion that links social, political analysis with personal stories of suffering. Their focus directs attention to the ways that “structural violence” leads to insidious, extreme, and tragically avoidable human suffering. This interpretation of suffering, namely, linking personal accounts of extreme suffering *to* the social matrix that precipitates them, has been termed by some theorists “social suffering.”

Building on this work, I propose a *social-suffering hermeneutic* that foregrounds the ways in which wider social forces coalesce to mar individual human lives. Thus, individual experience is read from within the larger social matrix that defines the parameters of that individual experience.

To develop a social-suffering hermeneutic, we need to understand what distinguishes this approach. We may identify four primary distinguishing factors in a social-suffering hermeneutic: (1) it foregrounds the praxiological nature of the experience of suffering; (2) it recognizes the presence of our interests in the naming of suffering; (3) it attends to the interplay between societal problems and personal suffering; and (4) it discerns the ways in which “core symbol systems and cultural discourses” are used to mediate suffering as a social experience.

First, a social-suffering hermeneutic foregrounds the praxiological nature of the experience of suffering. By “praxiological” I mean that the human experience of suffering (and all human experience) always already reflects praxis. By “praxis” I refer to the integral relation that exists

between human thought and action (or practice). Theory shapes experience and experience shapes theory in a never-ending cycle. This means that there can be neither a project of “pure theory” that is ahistorical, that claims a view from nowhere, nor can there be an understanding of action as strictly instrumental, cut off from discernment and insight. How the experience of suffering is depicted and named shapes that experience and creates a framework that gets triggered by future experiences of suffering. Conversely, experiences of suffering inform and transform what suffering means. Until suffering is “named” through words and other forms of expression, that experience remains inchoate and devoid of its power to shape lives for good or for ill.

In the process of naming the experience of suffering, one may understand that experience more transparently. One may identify what the experience of suffering means, namely, what is important about the experience. Accordingly, one may become less of a passive receptacle in the face of that experience. Through the process of naming, we can take greater possession of our lives. To understand that suffering is necessarily and unavoidably praxiological means that we do not unreflectively assume that the experience of suffering is merely a given. While we may claim that the experience of suffering—physical, emotional, and the like—is simply there, the minute we in any way acknowledge it we are, in fact, interpreting suffering. Suffering, like all forms of human experience, is interpreted. With interpretation comes some active purpose or interest.<sup>43</sup>

Second, a social-suffering hermeneutic recognizes the presence of interests in our naming of suffering. Interests, be they economic, political, social, or ecclesiastical, strongly influence how we understand suffering and how we respond to the diverse forms of suffering in our world. Varied interests compete for our attention as they put forward processes that attempt to guide our response to suffering along a certain line of thought and a certain mode of behavior. “These processes involve both authorized and contested appropriations of collective suffering.”<sup>44</sup> A given appropriation would be “authorized” if it reflects the viewpoint of the dominant economic interests of a society. Conversely, it would be “contested” if it challenged those interests.

Examples of social suffering like the Ciudad Juárez femicide serve as the terrain for the construction and contestation of the social order and of theological order as well. When a narrative is put forward to describe the femicide, it serves as a kind of “map” of the “legitimate” parameters

of our personal and collective worldview and reflects a particular point of view, one that serves the interests of some to the detriment of others. A given narrative may offer some explanation for why this horror has befallen the women and city of Ciudad Juárez, and, given the scale of this atrocity, the explanation may contain assumptions about the relationship of human beings to evil and human beings to God. Kleinman, Das, and Lock offer a compelling example of how interests drive the naming of suffering and in so doing reflect a worldview that appears inevitable but is not. They write:

The devastating conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, Zaire, Somalia, and Afghanistan are made over from national and regional disasters into trans-national tragedies that are “seen” and “felt” as part of the stream of everyday experience in the intimacy of homes thousands of miles away, at a safe distance. Social suffering is a feature of cultural representation both as spectacle and as the presentation of the real. But cultural technologies now exist to fashion the “real” in accord with the interests of power to a degree hardly imagined in the past. What W. J. T. Mitchell calls the gap between representation and responsibility is a master moral dilemma. How we “picture” social suffering becomes that experience, for the observers and even for the sufferers/perpetrators. What we represent and how we represent it prefigure what we will, or will not, do to intervene. What is not pictured is not real. Much of routinized misery is invisible; much that is made visible is not ordinary or routine. The very act of picturing distorts social experience in the popular media and in the professions under the impress of ideology and political economy.<sup>45</sup>

When the interests of political and economic power collude to determine the appropriation and commodification of suffering, and when this is packaged for mass consumption, this process of packaging creates and bends the experience of social and personal suffering so as to further the interests of power. These interests forge the “gap” between representation and responsibility and seek to maintain it. We cannot recognize valid appropriations of human suffering if we do not understand this gap.

Third, a social-suffering hermeneutic attends to the interplay between societal problems and personal suffering. This interplay is evident in public suffering that is widespread (genocide in Rwanda, for example) or in economic exchange that leads to the ongoing destruction of human lives

(such as sex tourism) or in the varied clustering of major social problems. When major problems coalesce, they create an intensive, compounded experience. Sufferers may experience substance abuse, domestic violence, depression, poverty, despair, and tuberculosis concurrently as part and parcel of living in a disintegrating community. To identify such a cluster of problems as solely individual, meaning peculiar to this single individual, is a severe distortion. The “blame-the-victim” strategy is a common example of such distortion. What such a cluster of human problems indicates is the “often close linkage of personal problems with societal problems. It reveals too the interpersonal grounds of suffering; in other words, that suffering is a social experience.”<sup>46</sup> As M. Shawn Copeland tells us, “Torture, genocide, extermination, ‘ethnic cleansing,’ ‘disappearance,’ enslavement, cultural decimation, protracted systemic racism,”<sup>47</sup> to name a few, all exemplify this interplay of the personal and social.

Finally, a social-suffering hermeneutic discerns the ways in which “core symbol systems and cultural discourses” are used to mediate suffering as a social experience. These core symbol systems may be in the form of classical images, folktales, stories, or metaphors, and they involve mythic stories of group origins. Regardless, they map the terrain of suffering and thereby offer the raw material by which suffering is depicted and authorized, whether in popular culture or by powerful social institutions. Every depiction furthers a particular point of view. These cultural representations, because they are living symbols, can be manipulated to give continuous birth to a worldview that clarifies the boundaries within which we find what is “legitimate” and beyond which we are not suppose to venture. Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to the ongoing interpretation of these symbols through the course of history as their “effective history.”<sup>48</sup> The effective history of these cultural representations and symbols mediates the construction of social and self-identity.<sup>49</sup>

This historical process, needless to say, is an inherently political one. The dominant political power will invariably put forward in compelling fashion the “legitimate,” “authorized,” or “conventional” view of who we are in the world. As living symbols, cultural representations serve as one nerve center of society well situated to cast forth their appeal to a wide range of audiences. Accordingly, the clever manipulation of symbols and cultural representations becomes a powerful tool in the endeavor to shape hearts and minds. This can alter social experience in ways that shift the tide of our historical understanding of suffering.



Social suffering affects not only the desperately poor of the two-thirds-world countries but also the most poor and powerless within the so-called first world. Disintegration affects the poor of the first and two-thirds worlds alike, and the concurrent phenomenon of suffering is not merely coincidental but causal. It reveals the global impact of a political economy that feeds on a permanent substructure of powerless people whose presence is seemingly a “necessary” by-product in the production of an ongoing comfortable lifestyle for the upper classes.<sup>50</sup> As Kleinman, Das, and Lock observe:

Social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems. Included under the category of social suffering are conditions that are usually divided among separate fields, conditions that simultaneously involve health, welfare, legal, moral, and religious issues. They destabilize established categories. For example, the trauma, pain, and disorders to which atrocity gives rise are health conditions; yet they are also political and cultural matters. Similarly, poverty is the major risk factor for ill health and death; yet this is only another way of saying that health is a social indicator and indeed a social process.<sup>51</sup>

In sum, a social-suffering hermeneutic develops a critical awareness of the appropriation of suffering (that is, praxiological, interests, interplay of social and personal, cultural representations). This self-conscious hermeneutic fosters an awareness of how conventional social experience can appear to be “natural” and “normal.” Yet this “appearance” of normality, while ubiquitous, often conceals the workings of power that inflict suffering on the vulnerable and innocent among us.<sup>52</sup>

If we employ a social-suffering hermeneutic, then we will ask questions of the femicide such as: Which population is most at risk of great suffering? How might we identify those who are most at risk to sustain debilitating suffering? chronic suffering? Who will likely experience the enduring assault of racism? sexism? classism? rape? torture? Are certain forms of institutionalized violence “demonstrably more noxious than others?”<sup>53</sup> Which population stands the greatest mortal risk? Whose economic, ecclesiastical, political, social, and commercial interests are served by keeping this experience of suffering invisible? What are the

conventional ways that cultural representations have been presented in popular culture or promoted by powerful social institutions? Such questions serve as a point of departure for a social-suffering hermeneutic.<sup>54</sup>

### **“Reading” the Femicide**

A social-suffering hermeneutic casts the suffering brought about by the femicide in a particular light, one that enables us to recognize that in the depiction and naming of this suffering lies great power to shape, even determine, that experience. Chapter 2 will lay out how this depiction further shapes the theological issues presented by the femicide. Every victim of the femicide confronted a cluster of social problems with origins well beyond their purview. These problems placed Latinas, like María Sagrario González Flores, and their families at extremely high risk for experiencing the most brutal human violence and dehumanizing institutional power. The proverbial odds were stacked against Sagrario. For us to recognize what is behind her horrific death would mean recognizing our own responsibility for the circumstances that led to her death, a recognition that is, in the words of Al Gore, “an inconvenient truth.”

### ***The Praxiological Nature of the Experience of Suffering***

By foregrounding the praxiological nature of the experience of suffering, we call attention to how the killing of the girls and women of Juárez gets named and how we thus understand the suffering it produces. Along with many feminist theorists, I have chosen to identify it as *femicide*. Others use either *femicide*, *homicide*, *murders*, or *killings*. Terms like *homicides*, *murders*, and *killings* remain commonplace, but in this circumstance they are vague and misleading. These terms obfuscate the significance of the tragedy of the Juárez femicide. They suggest that what the victims have unfortunately suffered is random, haphazard, and arbitrary—the work of a small group of sociopaths and nothing more. Moreover, these terms ignore questions of race, class, and gender. While the racialization of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals in the United States can be traced back to the politics, economics, and ideology (Manifest Destiny) surrounding the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, these racial politics consistently come to the fore every time it is economically beneficial to U.S., white, corporate interests. The femicide is one recent example of many.

The term *femicide* is marginally better. *Femicide* has been widely used to identify the Juárez murders because *femicide* explicitly introduces gender as central to these killings. It calls attention to the sex of the victim, and arguably, it directs us toward the way that gender identity is constructed within society. The term *femicide* signifies that the killing was motivated by the fact that the victim was female. As anyone who reads newspapers knows, violence in Juárez is rampant; bodies are mounting by the week. And as the documenting of the feminicide demonstrates, a large number of victims are victims because they are female. Still, the term *femicide* falls short. *Femicide*, along with the terms identified above, fails to suggest an underlying systemic evil as integral to this brutal taking of life. While these terms do suggest a horrific, tragic failing, they invariably indicate that the pertinent severe failure must be fairly limited and arbitrary. It “must be” a failure borne by one or a few individuals and certainly not a tragedy involving a widespread, tacit, banal participation in evil, a situation that demands that all of us consider our own complicity. These terms are all shortsighted ways of naming the Juárez tragedy.

Each renders invisible or distant the need for a systemic analysis. What has transpired and continues is not the murders of a few girls and women here and there, the possible work of a serial killer, but rather the ongoing ritualized killing of hundreds of poor, brown girls and women over more than fifteen years’ time. The circumstances suggest that this is the work of many, not merely a few. The feminicide’s duration and the arrests and forced confessions of a few innocent men<sup>55</sup> means that the perpetrators, whoever they are, enjoy unmitigated impunity. The state must be viewed as complicit if not directly responsible, as Rosa Linda Fregoso, Melissa Wright, and many other scholars have argued.<sup>56</sup> As we have already seen, the girls and women are not simply murdered. Their corpses reveal that they have been violently raped, that their breasts and genitalia have been savagely mutilated. Though hundreds of men are murdered in Juárez every year, unlike women victims the men’s “bodies are rarely mutilated or raped.”<sup>57</sup> Most often their deaths are linked to drug violence, or at least that is the intent of the perpetrators.

By naming this suffering *feminicide*, we make visible what otherwise remains invisible. *Feminicide* turns our attention toward the roots of this experience of suffering as virile “misogynist sexism, racist classism, and expansionist colonialism.”<sup>58</sup> These roots suggest some of the deep-seated sensibilities that give rise to this horrific feminicide, killings marked by

their brutality, by their sheer numbers, and by the impotence of civil authorities who have, for the most part, no desire to end them or, worse, a direct role in them. Naming them as *feminicide* begins to lay bear what is transpiring and to thwart all efforts to conceal the roots of this social trauma.<sup>59</sup>

A dramatic shift in gender roles likewise has influenced how this suffering is named. Some interpreters of the feminicide argue that Juárez's entrenched patriarchal culture coupled with the "farm-to-factory" transition of young women has fueled this atrocity. Many young women and their families came to Juárez from rural settings in which the women were necessarily dependent upon the men in the family to do much of the hard labor of farm work. However, as young women became the primary wage earners and thus the primary providers for their children, the relationships between these young women and the men in their lives shifted. These women were no longer dependent upon the financial support of the men. Employers sought out few men for jobs in the maquiladoras. Over time a growing number of young women began to realize that they did not need a husband, especially if he was abusive and did not have a job. This shift in gender roles, some claim, has contributed to a quasi-public acquiescence to the feminicide as a punishment for women who transgress seemingly "divinely ordained" gender roles.<sup>60</sup>

Some scholars suggest that the feminicide has been played off as a kind of billboard warning to women who want to assert themselves. A staff member of Casa Amiga, a crisis center for women confronting domestic violence in Juárez, reported that women are sharing accounts of the male partners threatening them with their lives if they do not "stay in line," claiming that women can be easily beaten or killed and the authorities will not investigate.<sup>61</sup> How we name the suffering of the feminicide is not just a question of acknowledging the enormous, multifaceted character of the suffering but instead requires a shift in how we perceive the structural, systemic roots from which it springs.

### ***The Presence of Disparate "Interests"***

When various groups lay claim in the name of various interests to how we perceive suffering, they create contested ground, in which competing narratives shape our understanding of the suffering of the feminicide's victims. Economic interests, the state's interests, and the interests of

dominant institutions (including the church) all come into play by means of various, competing narratives, each of which attempts to commodify and package this suffering according to its own interpretation.

The first of these, economic interests, constitutes one of the most fiercely debated perceptual terrains. As the outrage in response to the femicide escalated, so did a critique of the expansion of transnational capitalism and global neoliberalism. This rapid expansion grew out of, in part, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, better known as NAFTA, in 1993, which facilitated much more porous borders in the interest of “free trade.”<sup>62</sup> Proponents of this common critique argued that economic globalization led to the exploitation and in turn to the extermination of girls and women. As Fregoso recounts

During the 1990s, Ciudad Juárez was the largest export-processing zone on the border, host to roughly 350 manufacturing plants owned primarily by U.S. transnational corporations. These plants employed roughly 180,000 workers who were paid around \$23 per week in take-home pay, a little less than \$4 per day, or fifty cents per hour. . . . Antiglobalization perspectives provide valuable insight into how Juárez figures as the “local” embodiment of the way of global neoliberalism (market-based development) under the coordination and direction of the Group of Eight (G8), the IMF [International Monetary Fund], the WTO [World Trade Organization], and the World Bank; of the concentration of economic power in transnational corporations; of the internationalization of social divisions; and of the subordination of national economies to global forces. Without doubt, global and transnational dynamics implode into the geography of Ciudad Juárez.<sup>63</sup>

In response to this crucible, those critical of the expansion of global capitalism developed arguments that drew connections between the exploitation of female workers in the maquiladoras and the extermination of women in the femicide. These often were interpreted as part of “a single process.” Both were interpreted as “expressions of the exercise of power and gender hierarchies,” and each served, in part, “to explain the other.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, the female workers came to be known as *mujeres desechables* (“disposable women”). In spite of this reasoning, the femicide was, by and large, erroneously connected to the maquiladora industry. While the overwhelming majority of all the victims were poor, dark-skinned women,

overall, only a small number of them worked in Juárez's maquiladoras.<sup>65</sup> And yet, this connection remains popular in the minds of many interested in critiquing global capitalism.

It seems as if those critical of global capitalism would have us view the femicide's victims and its survivors as passive victims, poor, brown women unfortunately caught up on the wrong side of inevitable, capitalist "change and progress." And in some representations of the killings of women, such as the documentary *Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos*, the femicide's victims are depicted not only as "victims of globalization but as subjects in need of patriarchal regulation."<sup>66</sup> In others, such as *Performing the Border*, women are portrayed "not as being in need of regulation and surveillance, but rather as the very objects of regulation and surveillance."<sup>67</sup> Such examples contribute to the linking of the exploitation of women workers in the maquiladoras with women victims of the femicide. For women to be "in need of patriarchal regulation" or to be "objects of regulation and surveillance" means that they are seen as victims or as objects of global capitalism. Perhaps more insidiously, these third-world women become fodder, serving as the objects of first-world feminist definitions, which miss seeing the ways these women resist their situation in spite of the enormous sacrifice and courage such resistance entails.<sup>68</sup>

In the second narrative of suffering, according to the state's interests, the state viewed its interests in this femicide not in terms of protecting its female citizenry from extreme gender violence but in terms of deflecting attention from its horrific abdication of civil responsibility. When the state no longer could deny the growing number of these horrific killings, it began to deploy a blame-the-victim strategy. It defended this strategy by arguing that the victims were engaged in nonnormative sexual behavior, by which the state meant that these women were leading a *doble vida* ("double life") as prostitutes, were associating with lesbians, were influenced by women from the United States, and thus were becoming more independent and promiscuous.

According to this line of thinking, the victims brought the femicide upon themselves because of their essentially "immoral" behavior. Thus they are to be held responsible for the violence directed against them. Concurrent with this line of thinking was a "patriarchal nostalgia for an earlier era of male authority in which women remain wedded to the private sphere of domesticity and motherhood."<sup>69</sup> Eventually, widespread

pressure from hundreds of national, international, and transnational human-rights groups laid bare “state corruption and indifference,”<sup>70</sup> forcing the state to change its account of these killings but not to alter its failure to investigate.

In 2001 the state adopted a new narrative strategy of reporting that it was conducting an “investigation” into each case of the various “homicides” of women. With regularity the state argued that each case was independent and discrete and therefore unrelated to other cases. By so doing, it sought to undermine “the more general and systematic phenomenon of violence against women.”<sup>71</sup> This new narrative strategy helped the state generate the perception of its authority and professionalism, which it used to combat allegations of its corruption. The strategy also allowed the state to claim that female “homicides” were a normal part of life in any major city and to discredit the accusations being put forward by women’s-rights and human rights activists. The state accused these groups of “politicizing” the murders.<sup>72</sup>

The state has consistently focused on those arguing that the accelerated growth of transnational capitalism and global neoliberalism bear primary responsibility for the extermination of female bodies in Juárez. This narrative strategy has

worked to absolve the state of its complicity and perhaps even direct involvement in the murders of poor and dark-skinned women in Ciudad Juárez. . . . As the master narrative for the Left, globalism generates a problem of interpretation that is unable to account for the consolidation of a new form of state-sanctioned terrorism in Mexico. The state, however, is in many ways directly implicated in the culture of feminicide in the region. In February 2002, for example, state agents ambushed and assassinated Mario Cesar Escobedo Anaya, a defense attorney for one of the suspects in the killings, who was leading charges against police for their use of torture in extracting confessions.<sup>73</sup>

The state’s role and complicity must be foregrounded, because doing so provides greater clarity on the extreme degree of vulnerability marking the lives of young, poor, dark-skinned women in Ciudad Juárez. In the end, the feminicide is a crime of the state “which tolerates the murders of women and neither vigorously investigates the crimes nor holds the killers accountable.”<sup>74</sup>

While the state must be held accountable, Alicia Schmidt Camacho makes clear the complexity of such an assertion. She calls for an examination of *subjetividad desnacionalizada* (“denationalized subjectivity”).<sup>75</sup> To understand the suffering of the feminicide’s victims and survivors, Schmidt Camacho claims, we need to situate the feminicide in the context of the borderlands, not merely in Ciudad Juárez or Mexico. The U.S. government’s militarization of the borderlands has generated a new wave of criminal organizations who use the desert for clandestine commercial activity that traffics in human beings dubbed “illegal”<sup>76</sup> by the United States. This has contributed significantly to the borderlands functioning as essentially “denationalized space.” Schmidt Camacho posits: “In light of this feminicide, we need to distinguish the idea of “crimes against humanity” from its legal definition as a project of a nation-state. [The feminicide], in turn, directs us to new forms of human rights violations that have arisen as a result of the erosion of the [nation-state] because of globalized capital.”<sup>77</sup>

We need to develop an internationally binding understanding of world citizenship that applies to Mexican women and all the world’s women. This would be one part of a viable strategy to resist the condition of denationalized subjectivity in the face of violence against women, irrespective of any particular nation-state’s culpability.<sup>78</sup> Schmidt Camacho’s contribution here matters immensely because it directs attention to the ways in which global capital has increasingly compromised the nation-state. The standard of living enjoyed by a majority in the United States and the industrialized West comes at a terrible price. Yet this argument must not be used to let the Mexican state or the United States off the hook.

As far as the state is concerned, the suffering of the feminicide’s victims and survivors becomes a secondary concern in the face of the state’s more pressing interest to save face through damage-control narrative strategies—a highly dubious endeavor but one the state tenaciously pursues. It is a dubious endeavor because the Juárez feminicide has transpired while the buying and selling of the law has escalated to a new level, not only in its breadth among the rank and file but also in its reach, extending up to the highest levels of authority in the city of Ciudad Juárez and in the state of Chihuahua as well.

The careful research of journalists like Diana Washington Valdez, Alfredo Corchado, and Teresa Rodríguez, among others, details the



corruption within the local Juárez police, the Chihuahua state police, the local district attorney's office, and so on. Their research suggests that the governor's office in the state of Chihuahua is at least complicit in the femicide, cooperating by launching ever new investigations but ensuring that they will ultimately be stymied. Scapegoats for the femicide have been identified and tortured assiduously until confessions were elicited while the real criminals continue their killing spree unabated. The police, particularly the state police, have been directly implicated in the femicide.<sup>79</sup> The suffering of the femicide's victims and their families remains obscured because in this context the law and civil authority is a sham.

Attendant to these phenomena, the victims' plight has become much more obscure. NAFTA made the border porous so as to facilitate greater economic prosperity for U.S. corporations, but this in turn made Ciudad Juárez a highly attractive locale for competing drug cartels feeding the United States' escalating demand for cocaine, among other drugs. Because of NAFTA, it is now far easier to move drugs across the border. The drug cartel activity in Juárez has made corruption, violence, lawlessness, and impunity normative throughout the city, creating a climate of escalated risk for all city residents, particularly the most vulnerable—poor, dark-skinned, young women.

In 2004 authorities arrested several state policemen suspected of drug trafficking and murder. These arrests led to the confession of a man named Alejandro García, who claimed to have taken part in the murders of some of the women at the orders of both the state police and the Vicente Carrillo Fuentes drug cartel. This confession revealed a drug gang that counted corrupt municipal and state police among its members. One unidentified interviewee claimed that each time a major drug shipment crossed the border into the United States without being discovered, members of the drug gang would celebrate by killing women. Some gang members wanted to wear a "trophy of their success," so they would bite off the left nipple from the breast of their female victims and wear it on a chain around their neck. Yet in the following couple of years, even with the work of a federal special prosecutor and with evidence that implicated some 130 Chihuahua state officials, the femicide continued. Many officials initially implicated were later exonerated.<sup>80</sup>

Adding to the obscurity of the suffering of the femicide's victims is a largely invisible but organized network that has methodically worked to terrorize victims' family members, and all others, who start asking too

many questions. The creation of a “reign of terror” is to ensure that the femicide can continue with impunity, in part through the silencing of any public critique of the murders. Accordingly, any attempt to critique the corruption of the authorities or their immunity is met with a swift, brutal response. Journalists have recorded accounts of the police terrorizing women by brutally beating them, by gang raping them, by threatening to kill their spouses and children, or by showing them pictures of the dead bodies of women who had been raped and tortured. Faceless others have terrorized women by sending out anonymous death threats and by shooting and wounding their children.<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, those government officials who have made a sincere attempt to pursue the real criminals in this case have had their findings ignored, their efforts thwarted, been asked to falsify documents, and been coerced into stepping down from their positions. The source of this hideous pressure on them has remained for the most part hidden. One of the elements of the reign of terror is that its originating source is not transparent. Yet it exerts significant control over life and death. The dominant forces here strategize, on the one hand, to minimize if not mute any public critique of the femicide and, on the other, to escalate the experience of terror in the private realm—all of which serves to shape how the extreme suffering of the femicide is “understood,” or better said, misunderstood and distorted. For example, Sagrario González’s family members have been threatened and dismissed as they have repeatedly tried to keep the case of her murder in the public view. In response, authorities have systematically shunned and minimized the González family’s experience and employed a blame-the-victim strategy to trivialize her murder.

Finally, the third narrative of suffering, that of social institutions like the church, also influences how the femicide is perceived and how those who are suffering are to be regarded. While femicide’s survivors have turned to religious imagery in their grief and outrage (see chapter 4), it appears that Christian church authorities scandalously have remained silent concerning the femicide or have also adopted a blame-the-victim strategy.<sup>82</sup> Roman Catholic Bishop Renato Ascencio León, Juárez’s ordinary since 1994, was quoted in 2009 as stating that women need to change the way they dress and act, and he suggested that women’s “immodesty” is responsible for provoking men’s sexual aggression. Some have suggested that his comments, made at the Catholic Church’s Sixth World Meeting of Families (Mexico City, January 2009), could lead one to believe that he

blames the victims of the femicide for bringing about their rape, murder, and sexual mutilation.<sup>83</sup>

Julia Monárrez Fragoso observed that Catholic Church officials also criticize the mothers who have protested their daughters' murders, claiming that these mothers have created divisions in society by means of their criticism of civil authorities. She rightly notes the hypocritical, not to mention unprincipled, nature of this position, particularly given the outrage church officials stirred up against civil authorities when a Mexican cardinal was assassinated. Basically, Monárrez Fragoso is correct when she argues that as late as 2003 churches in Juárez—Catholic and Protestant (mainline and evangelical)—had not publically taken a position in support of the murdered girls and women. However, there are some members of religious communities and other religious leaders who have spoken out and acted on behalf of these victims.<sup>84</sup>

The Episcopal Conference of Bishops in Mexico (CEM) has issued a major pastoral exhortation (“Que en Cristo Nuestra Paz México Tenga Vida Digna”) as well as various public letters and statements calling attention to the violence that has erupted in several sectors of Mexico and urging the Mexican people to work at rebuilding the peace.<sup>85</sup> In addition, the six bishops of the state of Chihuahua have likewise issued a brief statement. Given the violence in the state, the Chihuahua bishops implore all who live within the state to turn to God and work toward an end to the violence.<sup>86</sup>

While some of the statements acknowledge in a general way that young women in Mexico are victims of discrimination and violence, none directly addresses the horror of the femicide. The 115-page pastoral exhortation issued by CEM devotes only a few paragraphs to the violence against women. In one paragraph, the document offers an insubstantial critique of those who hold the female victims themselves responsible for the violence they experience. The critique is insubstantial because it reduces violence against women to cases of domestic violence and claims that those who criticize women fail to understand the social, economic, and cultural conditions that prevent women from leaving their violent domestic relationship.<sup>87</sup> And while several Mexican bishops have individually issued letters addressing the violence and calling for it to end, sadly and incredibly, as of this writing Bishop Renato Ascencio León of Juárez has not issued such a letter addressing violence in general, much less the violence against women. At the very least, the inattention to the Juárez

femicide by Mexico's Roman Catholic Episcopal leadership suggests that this suffering is not that significant in the minds of the episcopacy.

### *The Interplay between Societal Problems and Personal Suffering*

The above analysis of the way interests shape how we regard the femicide for the most part described the macro level. A social-suffering hermeneutic, however, attends to the interplay of societal problems and personal suffering. Attention to consequential personal suffering foregrounds the particular experience of victims like Sagrario González and thus keeps the macro level of analysis from becoming merely an abstraction. By staying in touch with personal accounts of the victim's experience, we realize that this femicide urgently demands our response.

In the case of Sagrario González, a number of factors coalesced in her life suggesting that she and other women like her were extremely vulnerable and quite likely to suffer unjustly, severely. Tragically, too many of them have ended up brutally murdered. Sagrario was young (seventeen years of age), slender, poor, an employee of a maquiladora company, and, needless to say, female. She was in several respects the quintessential embodiment of the great majority of femicide victims. Not only was Sagrario's family desperately poor, but they also lived in a city where the concerns of the poor were and are summarily disregarded by local authorities who are themselves part of the working poor and so are forced to accept bribes to provide for their own families.

The struggle to survive forced the González family to relocate to Juárez. Along with her family, Sagrario was a transplant from the state of Durango, having lived in Juárez about two years at the time of her murder. Many families, likely hers as well, had known a simple, rural life and then moved to the sprawling metropolis of Juárez, Chihuahua, a city of some two million people, among the largest in Mexico. The adjustment necessitated by such a move was enormous. All of these factors contributed to her vulnerability.

Sagrario, like most young women, was desperate for work, given the extreme poverty of her family. Maquiladora managers sought out young women for their labor force. Managers found that such women had fresh energy for work, had a great deal of manual dexterity, did not question authority, and did not complain about sudden changes in their work shifts or about demanding work quotas. In short, they were a corporate

manager's dream. Sagrario's murderers abducted her within days of when her work hours changed. They took her while she was in transit from the maquiladora to her home. After her work hours changed, she traveled late at night by herself because her work shift no longer coincided with the work shifts of her sister or father.<sup>88</sup> The economic interests of U.S. corporations feed upon and profit greatly from the desperation and vulnerability of young female maquiladora workers like Sagrario.

Sagrario's horrific murder and the subsequent suffering of her family are exacerbated by a culture of entrenched, pervasive sexism that undermines "the adoption of public policies that would protect women."<sup>89</sup> In this particular kind of cultural milieu, authorities easily and mindlessly dismissed the concerns of Sagrario González's family. For example, the police authorities told Mr. González that his daughter probably either ran off with her boyfriend or that, unbeknownst to him, she was leading a double life as a prostitute. The clear message was that Sagrario, the victim, was to blame for supposedly being out alone late at night and/or for allegedly "dressing suggestively." Authorities had no supporting evidence for this assertion.<sup>90</sup>

The underlying message is that the lives of poor, young women are of a different and lesser human nature. Within a cultural context of pervasive interlocking systems of domination, the suffering of the femicide victims is of a lesser order of significance. It is regarded as suffering that can be more easily overlooked without much ado. When Sagrario's body was eventually found and identified, it was so decomposed that they could only establish that she had been stabbed repeatedly and strangled. As with the stories of many victims, it was impossible to establish definitively whether or not Sagrario was victim to one of the drug cartel's celebrations. But she could have been. No doubt, the perpetrators want everyone in the community with a conscience to fear, to be too afraid to go public with the demand for justice.

## Conclusion

Thus far, a social-suffering hermeneutic has offered us an angle of vision on the naming of suffering and its significance, and on the varied interests that seek to manipulate our understanding. In addition, we have seen how larger social forces coalesce in a fashion that generates many human casualties, captured in the suffering of Sagrario González and her family.

But our rational analysis of this suffering, while utterly crucial, is insufficient. The analysis thus far does not take into account society's tacit acquiescence to these atrocities. This tacit acquiescence emerges from a general sense, typically not expressed, that such suffering, while tragic to be sure, is nevertheless an enduring evil. No doubt, a widespread gender hierarchy operates. To put it plainly, if women in Juárez were killing poor men in large numbers, sexually mutilating their bodies, and making a public display of this, it would not be allowed to continue for well over eighteen years. What makes the reverse not just possible but a reality? What gives rise to this subconscious orientation? What feeds the tenacity of this orientation?

A social-suffering hermeneutic recommends a deeper level of reflection—namely, a consideration of the way core symbols and cultural discourses are interpreted so as to manipulate how Latinas themselves, and society at large, understand suffering. To understand what renders certain human lives inconsequential, and therefore disposable, recommends an analysis on a deeper level. Only at the conclusion of such analysis can we begin to understand what is at stake in asking the theological question of salvation.