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NAFTA: Capital- ismo Gore and the Femicide Machine

In a poor country everything seems less real.
 What difference does another atrocity make?
 —Angélica Liddell, *El año de Ricardo*, 2007

The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 marked the “kick-off toward a vertiginous and uneven trip toward the unknown,”¹ a sinuous road that led to Mexico’s descent into Capitalismo Gore.² Twenty years later, this has given rise to a particular geopolitical and economic arrangement that determines all aspects of our everyday reality. The advent of globalization and market liberation rapidly transformed into Capitalismo Gore, which has changed our geographies at multiple levels, creating a dystopic landscape where a semiotics of economic, social, symbolic, and existential violence is legible even within architecture as it offers itself to my gaze. The proliferation of desolate images of cities such as Tijuana or Ciudad Juárez, where the maquiladora industry—embodied in assembly factories—has become the cruel emblem of a state of exception resulting from the ferocity of corporations lured here by the de-regulation of labour, testing the human and environmental limits of greed.

Below I attempt to articulate a brief reflection upon the relationship between Capitalismo Gore and the “Femicide Machine,” taking into account NAFTA as a medullary historical moment in which intense labour and market de-regulation, as well as deterritorialization processes, reconfigured the concept of labour. That is to say, within Capitalismo Gore, the concept of labour has been resignified with a strong dystopic meaning, leading to a situation where being an expert on techniques of exerting violence is not only a normal job, but such an expert on violence is a desired worker, as this position offers an “opportunity for betterment” in the face of the global precarization of labour. The reconfiguration of labour brought about by NAFTA—which has resulted in the massive destruction of employment, economic precarity, and the “feminization of labour”—has also reaffirmed the axiology of the hetero-patriarchal system, metabolizing through Capitalismo Gore a fear of emasculation that men, and society at large, are currently experiencing.

By the “feminization of labour,” I mean, first, the emergence of the worst working conditions possible: wages below the minimum, extreme schedule flexibility and volatility, constant shifting within the job market, uncertainty regarding access to economic goods, exclusion from social rights, and a limited capacity for self-determination, all of which have been fuelled by NAFTA, especially in Mexico’s northern states. Second, and moreover, the feminization of labour implies the displacement of production processes to piecework in assembly factories or maquiladoras, to the bodies of women working in these factories—and beyond their bodies. This is nothing less than the industrialization of death, a macabre loop where women’s bodies are objects of fragmentation/mutilation/destruction in a process inverse and proportional to the manufacture and assembly of pieces that comprise their factory work. As women’s severed and mutilated bodies appear, the factory piecework is re-codified as femicide. This could be understood as a

mimetic, necro-economic process represented by mutilated bodies as products of the femicide machine, which connects actual assembly machines with gendering and social machines—under the name *Capitalismo Gore*.

Capitalismo Gore

This is what the worship of death looks like.
—bell hooks, *All about Love*, 2001

The concept of *Capitalismo Gore* designates the embodiment of hegemonic and global economic processes in specific (geographical) border spaces, where death is visibly the source of surplus value. In this case, I refer to the border located between Mexico and the United States. Borrowing the term *gore* from a cinematographic genre that refers to extreme violence, *Capitalismo Gore* refers to the explicit and unjustified bloodletting that occurs along the Mexican border, the price that this developing country has to pay for aligning itself with a capitalist logic that encourages and demands hyper-consumption—inextricable from actual cases of human dismemberment and gut-spilling. This is frequently tied to organized crime, the binary division of gender, and predatory and exploitative uses of bodies, although this explicit violence can also be considered as a tool for “necro-empowering,” which refers to processes that transform either contexts and/or situations of vulnerability and/or subalternity into possibilities of action and empowerment. This implies taking advantage of the logic of empowerment offered by the system itself, but reconfiguring it from a dystopic site where self-affirmation is perversely achieved through violence. The concept of *Capitalismo Gore* can thus serve as an tool to analyze the economic, social, political, symbolic, and cultural landscape of Mexico, as it has been affected and re-written both by drug trafficking and related crimes, as well as necro-politics as a political, symbolic, and economic mechanism that produces codes, grammars, narratives, and social interactions through the administration of death.

These terms are part of a discursive taxonomy that seeks to visualize the complexity of the criminal framework within the Mexican context, taking into account its links to neoliberalism, globalization, economic precarity, the binary construction of gender as a political performance, and the creation of capitalist subjectivities, now re-colonized by political economy and embodied by Mexican criminals and drug-dealers, the *endriago*⁴ subjects within the taxonomy of *Capitalismo Gore*. *Endriago* subjects are those who circumscribe a capitalist subjectivity built upon economic precarity and the hegemonic demands embedded in the construction of masculinity, which, according to Mexican intellectual Carlos Monsiváis, is based on the following traits: economic respectability, indifference towards danger, contempt for the feminine, and the affirmation of authority over anyone. These traits, along with the subjective appropriation of ultraviolent practices that incorporate self-referential “systems amongst big productive machines of social control and psychic instances that define ways of perceiving the world,”⁵ give rise to *endriago* subjects who form the ranks of the *gore* precariat. *Capitalismo Gore*, and the *endriago* subjects it produces, however, cannot be reduced to a question of masculinity framed within organized crime or drug-trafficking. It also involves the problem of structural machismo embedded in Mexican culture, in which the demands of hegemonic masculinity, diffused by the State and permeating Mexican society, constantly demand the verification of masculinity, which passes through the consecrated figure of the *macho*. The *macho*’s affirming traits overlap with those identified by Monsiváis, complemented by the uninhibited occupation of space, rampant virility, contempt for life (one’s own and others’), and high- and low-intensity violence (whichever is required).

The Femicide Machine

Sometimes I wonder...
What would this country be like if I wasn’t sick?
—Angélica Liddell, *El año de Ricardo*, 2007

The notion of the “Femicide Machine” was coined by Mexican writer and journalist Sergio González Rodríguez in his 2001 book *Huesos en el desierto*, an inquiry into the murder of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juárez. The author defines the Femicide Machine as “an apparatus that not only created the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and girls, but developed the institutions that guaranteed impunity for those crimes and even legalized them. A lawless city sponsored by a State in crisis.”⁶ In Rodríguez’s account, Ciudad Juárez is a border city traditionally linked to the presence of organized crime. For example, the prohibition of alcohol in the United States between 1920 and 1933 led to the proliferation of mafias in the Mexican northern border zone, which offered sex, alcohol, and drugs to Americans. The early presence of organized, violent crime in the area highlights the relevance of the economic changes the region underwent in the 1990s, when the Femicide Machine began to operate. In the Mexican context, *Capitalismo Gore*, the phase in capitalism which implies the creation of surplus value through extreme violence—where, in effect, dead bodies are merchandise following a necro-political logic, the concrete and symbolic practice of governing over death—allows us to think of the Femicide Machine as an apparatus of the extreme verification of masculinity within a context where *macho* violence and labour precarity are structural. Distributed both by institutions and the social, economic, and cultural choreographies derived from them, the Femicide Machine furthers the misogynous and dichotomous construction of gender according to which male implies privilege and patriarchal dividends—to the detriment of the female. The axiological renegotiation that takes place every

day in the Mexican northern border zone is the result of an economically open field that has realigned its ideology solely for financial benefit. It stops short of a possible renegotiation of the hegemonically imposed limits of gender, rejecting a peaceful renegotiation of the basic values of the hetero-patriarchate, threatened by those who work at the *maquiladoras*. The feminization of labour in this regard supposes a change in the biopolitical ideal of gender in the twenty-first century, which evidently clashes with traditional, nineteenth-century choreographies of sexuality and gender that continue to standardize behaviour in Mexico through the dominant values embodied in the heterosexual family and heroic masculinity; moreover, this corresponds to the reaffirmation of an industrial-era narrative based on the sexual division of labour. Therefore, the struggle to maintain this old biopolitical ideal, which implies the management and standardization of bodies and which affects processes of production/reproduction proper to traditional—catholic, machista, colonial—Mexico, is mixed with an “a-systemic culture, that is rudimentarily organized and contradictory.”⁷ This culture has characterized northern Mexico for some time; its capacity for symbolic assimilation, moreover, is facing “cultivated,” “official,” and “legitimate” cultural models that represent a binary vision of the world as two versions of Western culture: first, Western culture as represented by the United States, which has become First World hegemonic culture promoting a gender ideal in which women are “apparently” freer; this counters the gender ideal from northern Mexico, rooted in structural, national machismo, representing the “southern” version of Western culture.⁸ As a result, the hetero-patriarchal system, through concrete individuals whose meta-stable character is interpellated by the reigning order, demands a rechanneling of women’s behaviour, making use of the Femicide Machine if necessary. This legitimates the perceived threat to masculinity, which then justifies the use and abuse women with extreme violence as a tool to strengthen the hetero-patriarchal

and capitalist gore machinery. In this manner, the Femicide Machine, understood as an active branch of Capitalismo Gore, transforms extreme violence not only into an extermination tool but also into a spectacular apparatus that creates a gore market and consumers.

Inappropriate/Improper/Strange Bodies

[...] Sometimes I wonder...

What would this country be like if I did not have a body?

—Angélica Liddell, *El año de Ricardo*, 2007

Another function of the Femicide Machine is to demonstrate that women's bodies do not belong to them, beyond their productive/reproductive functions or hyper-sexualization, always to the benefit of men. Within this machista logic, habeas corpus is a privilege exclusive to men. Therefore, the idea that women's bodies are inappropriate, improper, and do not belong to them implies that female bodies must be governed and administered through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, and when appropriated by their "owners," men can destroy or punish those bodies. Punishment ranges from injurious stigmatization (the labeling of "the whore") and jail (criminalization of abortion) to murder (femicide).

Although the advent of maquiladoras or assembly factories in Mexico dates back to 1965 (a measure taken by the Mexican government in order to create employment for former temporary labourers coming back to their country), the mass incorporation of women into the workforce in northern Mexico greatly intensified in the 1990s. According to data offered by the INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, or the National Institute of Statistics and Geography), the number of maquiladoras rose from 12 in 1965 to 3630 in 2001. The incorporation of women into the maquiladora workforce, thus defies this notion of the inappropriateness/impropriety/strangeness of

their bodies—as it simultaneously intensifies it. This is because the "feminization of labour" implies a paradox: capitalism creates bodies to be exploited, as it blurs the boundary between liberalism and democratization. In that sense, as opposed to having been freed by factory work, women have been liberalized: that is to say, while their bodies have been subjected to the capitalist production machine and thus rendered precarious (as they are the cheapest manual labour possible), they are still also subject to their traditionally assigned domestic (non-remunerated) labour.

Moreover, the feminization of work is perceived by men as an usurpation of privileges and authority. Thus, women's bodies become once again improper, in the sense that they are occupying a position that does not belong to them. That is to say, from the male point of view, both spatially and in gender terms, the feminization of work is inappropriate. This perspective, however, fails to consider the deeper implications for the objective conditions of the feminization of work as such, where its consequences cannot be rendered visible as they really are: a life full of excess labour and misery, without the remote possibility for change.

The condition of women's bodies being inappropriate, strange, or improper can also be observed as they traverse public spaces at night, territories "traditionally" codified as masculine. When women appear in these spaces—specifically, women exiting their night shifts from the maquiladoras, forced to circulate this terrain that does not belong to them—they are radically penalized. Indeed, the democratization of public space is only possible if the bodies that traverse it are devoted to the production of surplus value, bodies marketed by parading themselves on public space to sex hyper-consumers. A third site where this impropriety/inappropriateness/strangeness of women's bodies can be witnessed is in the spectacularization of the remains of women murdered by the Femicide Machine. As images of mutilated bodies are globally distributed in the mass media, empathy is slowly negated

in a kind of "corpse-zapping" that assimilates the logic of the visual economy profiting from morbidity and suffering. This mediatized spectrality functions as a filter of the reality it renders uncomfortable, othering and decontextualizing what is familiar about the murdered women in order to create symbolic and emotional distantiation in the viewer. The impropriety/strangeness of murdered women's bodies can be conceived in this context as a cartography that seeks to establish a macabre social imaginary based on permanent threat. The representation of the femicide tragedy serves as a direct warning; as Roberto Saviano reminds us, "we all understand the message when it is written on flesh."⁹

Workers devoted to violence, that is, Capitalismo Gore's armed wing, the Femicide Machine, conveys this message to women by tearing them apart and rendering vulnerable their bodies. This kind of violence is also a symbolic embodiment of the perpetuation of a devastating hetero-patriarchal axiology and of a homophobic social pact. In this context, justice for those improper bodies will never occur because they are the residue of the masculine counter-offensive against gender disobedience. These bodies are also a violent response to the quotidian, economic restructuring brought about by NAFTA. That is to say, the Femicide Machine is a response to a discursive void, the inability to bestow a common-sense understanding of the current social and economic dystopia that can explain the changes brought about by NAFTA and how it has affected our lives.

Conclusion

Femicide in Mexico can be read as the most atrocious consequence of recent social, political, and economic choreographies, that is, the relational movements and behaviours built upon hegemonic social structures—not only masculine supremacy, but also on its axiological decanting as Capitalismo Gore. As we have seen, Capitalismo Gore uses the Femicide Machine to maintain the homo-

social pact as the metastabilizing order, but in order to do so, it must be nourished by blood; at the same time, it feeds capitalism's drive towards "creative destruction." Finally, the Femicide Machine is the core apparatus that constitutes the extreme version of the necropolitical governmentality of gender in our country, in which two overlapping regimes of body management converge: the sovereign regime, corresponding to the moment of colonization, in which the body of populations (and especially of women) is a body for death (here patriarchal power is understood as a sovereign power that makes use of domination, possession, and extermination techniques as ways to deal with the other); and the contemporary regime, in which the body (mainly, but not exclusively, women's bodies) is a body for capital (bodies conceived, above all, as a productive reproductive force, in which profitability is prioritized above all). This overlapping of regimes could be understood as a kind of epistemic, economic, and corporeal neo-feudalism that weaves strategic relationships with the Capitalismo Gore machinery into a matrix of contemporary social choreographies—the multiplication of relational movements through which technological apparatuses of global transmission distribute standardized corporeal choreographies through affect, consumption, and violence.

Notes**1**

Misha Glenny,
McMafia: El
crimen sin
fronteras
(Barcelona: Ediciones
Destino, 2008), 74.

2

**Or, "Slasher
Capitalism."**

3**4**

**This translates into
"monster, beast,
ogre."**

5

**Félix Guattari
and Suely Rolnik,**
Micropolítica:
Cartografías del
deseo (Madrid:
Traficantes de
Sueños, 2006), 41.

6

**Sergio González
Rodríguez, The
Femicide Machine
(Los Angeles:
Semiotext(e), 2011),
7.**

7

**Guillermina
Valdés-Villalba,
"La desmitificación
de la frontera,"
in Entre la magia
y la historia:
Tradiciones,
mitos y leyendas
de la frontera,
ed. José Manuel
Valenzuela Arce
(México: El Colegio
de la Frontera Norte/
Plaza & Valdés, 2000),
366.**

8

Ibid.

9

Roberto Saviano,
Gomorra
(Barcelona: Editorial
De Bolsillo, 2008),
145.