Specters in the Sand: The Urban Hauntings in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s
*Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*

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I would first like to thank the UCLA Center for the Study of Women for inviting me to present my work at this conference. This short paper was extracted from a longer, more developed dissertation chapter entitled “Specters in the Sand: The Urban Hauntings in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders.” While the dissertation in general aims to study the role of memory and haunting in contemporary Latin American literary texts in which the setting is a city, this particular chapter looks at a text in which the border city (U.S.-Mexico border) is the setting.

The importance of setting to the plot, the connected relationship between place and what is happening in that place, opportunely reflects a major goal of this research, which is to explore how the city can create certain social conditions and how the same space that can create certain social conditions can also be the same space to compel its inhabitants to address those conditions. That is, the city is the medium by which certain phantoms are created, but it is also the medium by which its inhabitant subjects are haunted, either by memory or the spectral. This dynamic becomes more complex and interesting when the city-space we are analyzing is the border city, because the border already signifies ambivalence and contradiction, characteristics that mark not only the border as a concept and a space, but also its inhabitants and their identities. Analyzing the city in border texts also questions the notion of city as “center” and the center/periphery model in general, challenging conventional notions of the “city” as a centralized megalopolis. In this work, I suggest that the border city is the “new” Latin Americanized, transnational urban space, with its unique characteristics, complexities, and hauntings.

Desert Blood (2005) is a fictional story based on factual events, the over four hundred unsolved murders of young women in Cd. Juárez, México, a fourteen-year crime wave that has by now received international attention from activists and academics alike. By studying Desert
Blood I aim to productively complicate the various characterizations of the border and produce richer readings and more complex analyses of larger border questions that address identity, gender, post-nationalism, migration, and globalization.

Gaspar de Alba highlights border urban space through an interesting perspective as she has her protagonist, Ivon Villa, a women's studies professor, return to her hometown of El Paso, Texas to arrange for an adoption for herself and her female partner. When the pregnant Juárez factory worker who agrees to give up her baby becomes the latest victim in the string of unsolved murders of Mexican women in the area, Ivon conducts her own investigation surrounding the terror-inflicting murders. The phantoms that haunt in this novel are both literal and figurative as Ivon must contend with actual physical deaths as well as with her own personal phantoms, particularly those of the past. But it is precisely her return to her native El Paso that conjures these phantoms.

As the protagonist, Ivon Villa represents an identity that is formed by, but also encompasses, various kinds of borders, and though they may be metaphorical in nature, their allegorical meanings are almost always rooted in very precise geographical spaces. According Gaspar de Alba:

Having Ivon be both an insider and an outsider helps readers connect to her own sense of displacement, because even those of us who are native but who leave and develop new lives outside of El Paso know that we can never go home again, and yet, when we do, we feel as though we've never left, and we're suddenly insiders again in a place that we always felt disconnected from to begin with. So there are all of these contradictions of place that are very specific to a border region, and that Ivon (hopefully) embodies for the reader. (E-mail)

Ivon Villa is brought right into the middle of the murders in Juárez, first because the mother, a maquiladora worker named Cecilia, of the unborn child that Ivon hopes to adopt, is brutally killed, then, because her own sister Irene turns up missing after a night of drinking and
entertainment at the annual Juárez expo. It is Ivon’s search for answers about Cecilia’s death and her search for her sister that prompt her to traverse both El Paso and Juárez and it is primarily through her perspective that the region is characterized. The dominant characterization of the border in the novel is that of a dangerous place, particularly for women. The border region is portrayed almost as a kind of hell where “lots of women are dying in Juárez these days” (85). As Ivon learns more and more about the murders of the women, she, in moments, becomes eager to escape “this hellhole” and decides that Juárez has become “a nightmare” (98).

Ivon clearly harbors ambivalent feelings about El Paso/Juárez, with which she seems to have a love-hate relationship. Though she and Ximena reminisce about a time when the border was not as dangerous, partying “in the good ole days when Juárez was safe,” she consistently maintains a critical gaze of her hometown (23). Rather than arrive at any resolutions, her feelings about the city remain irresolute: “At the top of the bridge, sitting between the two flags, was one of Ivon’s favorite views of downtown El Paso: tall bank buildings against the slate gray mountains and a bluebonnet sky. She loved this place. She hated this place. Always, the same contradictions” (57). Ivon represents a subject marked by ambivalence and hybridity, an in-between space, as developed by cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha. But it is precisely this liminal space, between “two flags,” literally on the border, that creates a contradiction in herself, an identity that has been shaped and continues to be influenced by this geographic location. Of course it is a location marked by its particular geopolitical and cultural registers. We can see how this urban space shapes its subjects and vice versa more clearly in a passage that speaks to the narratives that its inhabitants create and the memories they suppress:

“I’ve always said people lie to themselves in this town,” Ivon said. That’s one of the things that had driven her away. People like to pretend they can cover the sun with one finger, while the truth is shining all over the place. People forget things in El Paso. [...] The relatives will look you over, from your Doc Martens to your chinos to your tank top
and the tattoo of the two-headed ax splayed on the back of your neck, and say, have you gained a little weight, honey? Are you married, yet? *Denial is not a river in Egypt*, her father used to say. But nobody gets it. Nobody gets anything in El Paso,...this lithium-loaded city where nothing and nobody ever changed. (31)

This is a poignant passage that wonderfully captures all of the complex analytical elements of the broader dissertation. The people of a city try to create a false narrative in order to try to dismiss and forget the reality. What is interesting about this particular passage is how the strategic forgetfulness/denial is attributed to the inhabitants of a city, in this case, a border city, and also in this case, a border city which is part of a region where such horrible acts of violence and murder are committed against its women. The passage above identifies a mentality of the people, one characterized by looking the other way or pretending not to see something that is clearly in front of them, whether it be a *lesbiana* or the murders of hundreds of poor, brown women. We can therefore see the connection between how the inhabitants of the city think and what is going unsolved and unpunished in the city. That is, we can see how the people construct the city that constructs the people.

Ivon is frustrated throughout by what seems to be a city that is passive and content in its passivity: “Eight years ago when she’d left El Paso, she vowed she’d never live here again; things were stagnant here-nothing ever changed” (98). But Ivon refuses to remain stagnant. She recognizes that this border region, in fact, has changed- for the worse. But both as a woman and an intellectual she decides that she cannot sit still and do nothing: “She thought she knew everything there was to know about this place. The truth was things had changed, and she didn't understand any of it... How could she turn her back on this chance to do something?” (98). Ivon is the opposite of what she has despised about the city for so long- while she accuses El Pasoans of being in denial, she strives to learn more and more about the murders. The novel, then, may be suggesting that it is only in fully acknowledging the social realities of the border and in the
reclaiming of this public urban space by women that will begin to create positive changes in these cities and discourage the abuse of its women.

If indeed the people construct the city that constructs the people, if identity can be constructed by space and space can be constructed by identities, then the character of Ivon in *Desert Blood* represents a possibility for positive change. While both her identity and the geographical urban border space can be characterized as ambivalent and complex, both the protagonist and the setting are arguably round characters in the novel because they evolve, but they do so in relation to each other. Ivon’s struggle to reckon with her own personal ghosts, her family, her ex-lover, and even the city itself, advances the plot and leads to a reassuring solution.

The hauntings that I believe the novel wants to draw more attention to, however, are not those of any particular fictional character, but of the very real women who have been murdered in Cd. Juárez over the past fourteen years. While the ghosts of the many women killed in this urban region are not as easily perceived as the “living” ghosts like Ivon’s ex-lover, Raquel Montenegro, the manifestation of these hauntings is very present in the novel.

In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida explains how ghosts represent something that comes back to be reckoned with in spite of efforts to cover it up and dismiss it as gone and forgotten. Likewise, Avery Gordon, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), defines a ghost as “one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way” (8). And both offer as the reason for haunting a way of getting us to pay attention to what has happened in the past or to what is currently happening in order to address it. When one is haunted then (individual or collective), there comes with the haunting an obligation, a responsibility to “fix and transform a troubling situation” (22). With this context, it is clear that
the ghosts in *Desert Blood* are invoking the characters in the novel, and by extension, us, the readers, to pay attention to what is happening on this urban border and to do something about it. But what is most interesting is how these ghosts speak through the city, how the urban space is not only the site of its crimes, but also the site of its hauntings. In *Desert Blood*, the ghosts of the women haunt both ethereally and materially, but through the landscape of the urban city. From a house in a colonia in Juárez, desperate for answers regarding the whereabouts of her sister, Ivon looks out the “barred window over the sink [and can] see the border highway in the distance and behind it the ASARCO smokestacks and the black bridge. A Southern Pacific train rumbled across the bridge, wheels screeching against the trestles. It sounded like a woman screaming” (144). This passage shows how the city itself reveals a speaking, in this case screaming, ghost, “barely, in the interstices of the visible and the invisible” (Gordon 24). A more material representation of the ghosts that occupy this space are the symbolic crosses that represent them. After paying a toll to cross an international bridge in downtown El Paso, Father Francis points these crosses out to Ivon: “‘See that?’ [he] pointed to a telephone pole painted with a black cross on a bright pink rectangle. ‘Each one of those crosses that you see stands for one of the murdered women. You see them all over the city, one for each dead woman and girl’” (35). These crosses are a symbolic way of conjuring the ghosts of these dead women, and “conjuring is a particular form of calling up and calling out the forces that makes things what they are in order to fix and transform a troubling situation” (Gordon 22). Moreover, these distinctive crosses are part of the urban landscape; the city is the medium by which its citizens are haunted. But what is it that the ghosts want to communicate to its citizens? Gordon reminds us that “ghostly matters are a part of social life. If we want to study social life well, and if we want to contribute to changing it, we must learn to identify hauntings and reckon with ghosts, [we] must
learn how to make contact with what is without doubt painful, difficult, and unsettling” (23). The obvious “unsettling” situation is that of the hundreds of women that have been brutally murdered in this urban border region. What the urban hauntings essentially do is force us to reckon with a reality which has otherwise tried to be covered up.

The painted pink and black crosses that Father Francis points out in the novel are real. These painted crosses, along with actual wooden, pink crosses, can be found scattered throughout the city of Juárez. An article by Sarah Arnquist entitled “Pink Crosses: Fighting Oppression in Mexico” (2004), poetically describes the meaning of these crosses:

Reflections of pink crosses mar displays of puffy, white wedding gowns in downtown Ciudad Juárez. Every third store sells hope to women in yards of tulle and lace; every third light post destroys their hope. Each of the hundreds of pink crosses painted on light posts in Juárez represents a woman who was murdered in a jealous rage, beaten beyond recognition or raped by a boyfriend, husband or drug gang.

Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes a captivating crime novel, but it is based on a disturbing reality. While I study the representation of the city and its phantoms in literature, the ghosts in the novel may be relegated to metaphorical. But if literature is a reflection of our reality, past and/or present, then the metaphorical may reflect the real. What is poignant and haunting about Desert Blood is precisely that it is based on real events in a real place. Part of what I had hoped to accomplish with this chapter is to bring the theories of the border, of urban space and of haunting with the literature to show how the ghosts that haunt in the novel are the ghosts that haunt this border region in reality. Furthermore, just as I believe Desert Blood obliquely suggests, it is important to consider the effects of the border city becoming a transnational metropolis, a new center of a globalized community, and if we are prepared to productively deal with those effects. Will we be attuned to the ghosts that will continue to haunt us as a result? And how will we respond?
References

**Primary**


**Secondary**


____. E-mail interview. 12 June 2007.


