“Becoming part of the statistics”:
Representation of the Juárez Femicides through Affective Techniques in the Novels *If I Die in Juárez* by Stella Pope Duarte and *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* by Alicia Gaspar De Alba

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Author’s Declaration

Unless otherwise indicated in the text or references, or acknowledged above, this thesis is entirely the product of my own scholarly work. Any inaccuracies of fact or faults in reasoning are my own and accordingly I take full responsibility.

Graz, am

Unterschrift der Studierenden

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### Abbreviations

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1. Introduction

In the Mexican city of Juárez, known “for its maquiladoras, drug cartel, and pollution” (Livingston 61), young, poor, brown women work in factories called maquiladoras, under inhumane and abusive work conditions (cf. McMahon 146). The social and cultural marginalization of girls and women, along with the economic exploitation they face, expose them to sexualised violence. Since 1993 femicides, “the most extreme form of gender inequality” (Carcedo and Sagot 1; in: Wilson 8), have haunted the city, with hundreds of women being brutally violated and murdered (cf. Mata 15). Caputi and Russell define femicides as including,

- a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse [...] physical and emotional battery, sexual harassment [...], forced heterosexuality, forced motherhood [...], psychosurgery, [...] other mutilations in the name of beautifications. Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicides. (Caputi and Russell 84; in: Gaspar de Alba 83)

Gaspar de Alba states that more than 300 “young girls and women, some as young as five years old” have been discovered between 1993 and 2003 in the city, “their bodies [...] found strangled, mutilated, dismembered, raped, stabbed, and torched; some were so badly beaten, disfigured, or decomposed that their remains could not be identified” (1; Wilson 8).

According to Livingston, “[t]he murders of poor, young women result from a displacement of economic frustration onto the bodies of the women who work in the maquiladoras” (60). The murders are considered an acceptable form of punishment for women in a system that constructs women as “cheap labor and disposable” (ibid.). Also, according to Olivera (2006), “[t]he neo-liberal economic model itself propitiates gender violence by impoverishing and disempowering women” (in: Prieto-Carrón et al. 29), a factor that contributes to further vulnerability towards sexualised violence. Additionally, traditional role models posit women into the private and men into the public sphere. However, as women access the labour market, this conservative understanding of gender is being questioned. Through sexualised violence, “the male workers attempt to put women in their (traditional) place” (Livingston 70). Even though the reasons are multifaceted, the femicides are not solely a “macho backlash [that is] often expressed through violence” (Livingston 70) but have far deeper and more complex roots.
Economic inequality and devaluation of certain already marginalised groups exploit those that are already at risk of poverty and sexualised violence, amongst other factors. By structurally and economically exploiting young, brown, poor girls and women, their risk of sexualised violence and abuse increases even further. As Pepper states, the intersection of gender, social class, migratory background, rural vs. urban, and skin colour/ethnicity are consciously discriminated against in order to exploit women and “achieve economic interests” (142). Thus, transnational companies profit from feminising poverty, and due to the intentional indifference of institutional forces, neither exploitation nor abuse against women is penalized.

In this thesis I will analyse how affect is used in the two selected primary texts to make the implied reader bear witness of the tragic events in Juárez. The first novel is Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders (2005) and which focuses on the connection between economic exploitation and sexualised violence committed on the bodies of female Maquiladora workers. On the other hand, Stella Pope Duarte’s If I Die in Juárez (2008) emphasises the role of cultural devaluation of women, blaming machismo and gender roles on the femicides committed in Juárez.

The first research question this thesis poses deals with the representation of femicides: How are affective techniques used to represent the femicides in Juárez and how are generic conventions employed to create affect in the two texts analysed? I argue that both authors fictionalise the account of the femicides and include affects such as shame, fear, and anticipation to immerse the implied reader in the text.

The second question asks in how far the sexualised violence is depicted affectively in Desert Blood and If I Die in Juárez and to what extent the authors use sensationalist techniques to represent the brutality. I will attempt to answer how the sexualised exploitation that is specifically targeting women is represented through affective techniques in the novels If I Die in Juárez by Pope Duarte and Desert Blood by Gaspar de Alba¹.

To facilitate a thorough analysis of the novels, I will first establish my theoretical framework. To begin with, I will delve into affect studies and, as the field is arguably convoluted, I will guide the reader by initially establishing my theoretical basis, then showing the omnipresence of affect, and subsequently embedding affect studies in a literary context, using, amongst others, Probyn’s theory of “Writing Shame”. This approach will be helpful insofar as the texts will be analysed regarding their affective techniques.

¹ Here a trigger warning has to be expressed because the thesis thematises topics of sexualised violence, rape, and discusses detailed depictions of murder.
In a second step, a postcolonial approach focusing on Mbembe’s concept of *Necropolitics* will follow, since the state’s interference on the bodies of female migrants is a predominant topic in the two primary texts. *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* use this device to evoke the affects of hopelessness and inescapability regarding the economic and social status of certain characters. For example, in *Desert Blood* the safety net for those born on the US side of the border is better developed than for Mexican citizens, especially female workers, who suffer from less regulated jobs and unsafe housing environments.

The next chapter embeds the thesis in an intersectional approach, particularly focusing on the construction of the Mexican female’s body as immoral in a cultural and political context. Thus, the subsequent chapter ties on to the previous discussions, allowing a perspective on the gendered body in the context of sexualised violence and the construction as worthless and immoral in a highly gendered system. Here, I will first briefly discuss Hill Collins’ research on intersectionality and then move on to define the method I will embed in my thesis. As the categories of race and gender would not suffice to analyse the discriminatory behaviour in the novels, I will draw on research that discusses the intersections between economic and migratory status, sexuality, and age in a broader sense. Here, it can be deduced to what extent a patriarchal society is affectively charged when women transcend the borders between public and private in the novels *Desert Blood*, and, especially in *If I Die in Juárez*.

To bring together all of these three theories, the last method discussed is a gender studies approach. Here, I will briefly draw on Butler and Hausen’s research of the body as embedded in a culturally constructed environment. In addition, I will integrate new research by, in part, non-Western scholars to bring in a more diverse discussion of the topic. Taylor’s research on the objectification of women as immoral is brought together with Comaroff and Comaroff’s discussion on the construction of immoral women as worthless, and Moral argues that worthless and immoral women are constructed as disposable. This theoretical groundwork is important insofar as it will show that the female body in *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* is constructed as an immoral place, in which murder, violence, and sexualised victimization are justified and seen as a social cleansing.

Using affect theory, postcolonial approaches, intersectional approaches, and theoretical input from gender studies now allows an analysis of the primary texts, *Desert Blood* by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and *If I Die in Juárez* by Stella Pope Duarte, in which I will show that affect is used to fictionally represent the events in Juárez. As both novels represent real events in a fictionalised context, the selected authors use narrative techniques and generic conventions for their purpose, i.e. immersing the implied reader, and, especially in the case of *Desert Blood*,
educating about the events. Thus, an analysis of genre, intertextual devices, and symbolisms are essential, as an affective analysis is especially fruitful in this context. I will focus on generic conventions in the works, in particular those regarding metaphors and imagery. An important device is the use of intertextuality to represent the femicides. Here, the intertextual references in Desert Blood and If I Die in Juárez will be analysed. Following this analysis, I will delve into the depiction of sexualised violence with regard to the characterisation of perpetrators and victims, as well as the creation of affect through descriptive language, to compare and contrast the different techniques used to pique the implied reader’s tension. Close readings will be implemented here, as they are important in the analysis of sexualised violence and contain a concise overview of the techniques the implied authors use to affectively represent the brutality.

The last chapter will focus on sensationalist techniques, concentrating on the affect of shame in If I Die in Juárez, thematising a dualist separation of body and mind in the context of sexual trauma. Additionally, the mode of focalisation used will be foregrounded to depict the sensationalist aspects in If I Die in Juárez. Desert Blood will be delved into through the analysis of the affect of anticipation and the analysis of the ending, in which the hopelessness and inescapability of the current situation is made a subject of discussion.

In regard to the reasons for choosing the novels Desert Blood and If I Die in Juárez, I found it essential to pick one novel that has received a more successful reception, and one that lacked this response. The reason for this is that I wanted to analyse, whether the affective techniques used differed from one another. Secondly, I was striving for diversity in the works I have chosen, deciding against a literary canon in order to break free from restrictive classifications. I made this decision to understand the unheard voices that are exactly depicted in the two primary texts, written by two women directly affected by the gruesome murders in Juárez.

The core of my analysis will be the argument that affective and often sensationalist techniques are used to affect the implied reader. I will examine which affects are employed, why they are used, and how they represent the tragic events.

Thus, this thesis asks how affect can be used in order to represent the femicides in Juárez and to what extent the two authors sensationalize the tragic events in Desert Blood and If I Die in Juárez. As both novels are works of fiction that fictionalize true events, they portray a certain image of the femicides that is framed in a narrative to create suspense. In my analysis, I argue that the fictional accounts of the femicides are representations and both use authors a sensationalist approach in order to convey the tragic events and affect the implied reader.
Theoretical Part

2. Affect Theory

“[Y]ou cannot read affects; you can only experience them”

—O’Sullivan (126)

Affect Studies is an immensely broad field of study, as the research area spans from natural sciences to technology to the humanities. Here, I will first give a basic understanding of the scholars on whom I will draw my research, contesting their arguments with other leading affect academics, and then I will delve deeper into the affect of shame, the construction of the body, and the omnipresence of affect.

Before delving into the literary importance of affect, it is essential to define the concept itself. Affect is a notion that can be seen but is invisible at the same time. It consists of more than emotions and feelings, as it is, in the addition of the mind also grounded in and experienced by the body. It is set in the body, but also always experienced in the context of the culture our bodies live in, being formed by each part of our society. Seigworth and Gregg define affect as a concept that “arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (1); as “an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities” (1). It can be read as an intensity that travels through bodies, be it “human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise” (ibid.), and from time to time stays in these parts that it affects, where it is able to render humans stunned, “drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations” (ibid.) through its forceful effect. To ground this theoretical argumentation in a contextualised discussion, affect can be felt when experiencing shame, fear and/or anxiety; where the experienced is both central to the mind and the body, while it is still fully embedded in the very society and culture in which the that the affect is experienced.

However, how does affect differentiate itself from emotion? Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari provide an important basis for the field of affect studies in their paper “Percept, Affect, and Concept.” They define affects as

no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man
because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. (in: Miller 115).

Again, here the connection between the person and its environment is emphasised, while arguing that affect exists without humans experiencing them; however, I would argue that the affect that is “caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words” (ibid.) can only exist insofar as the person experiencing it does. Miller goes even one step further by conceptualizing “sensations, percepts, and affects” as “beings” (ibid.), which, I state is a bold claim, as these notions always need to be experienced in order to exist. Affect is evoked; it does not exist without humans experiencing it. However, I agree that affect is a concept that “exceeds human boundaries and has an independent ontology that challenges how we conceptualize cognition, sociality, and familiar binaries such as the human/inhuman and organic/inorganic” (Miller 116). The consequence and main point in this section is that affect, in its very essence, creates an understanding of the human body as constantly connected to its surroundings. The gender and critical race theorist Sara Ahmed also sees affect as a concept that functions as a “bodily response that corresponds to pre-existing and changing relations (economic, political, or cultural) with the affecting object” (in: Rogers 203), which means that, Ahmed sees affect as a social construct and human emotional and bodily responses are always in one sense or the other steered and constructed by their environments. Rogers claims that through “intersubjective relations, encounters with environment, brushes with the historical” and other such factors, namely “exterior stimuli” (ibid.) that produce the environment that then reflects on the individual human being (cf. ibid.).

Also, Seigworth and Gregg reason that affect is “persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” (1). Thus, affect, in its very definition, is neither concrete nor explicitly definable, while still being omnipresent. Affect is as much situated in the mind as it is in the body. The “Deleuzian-Spinozist line of recent theory [argues] that no embodied being is independent but rather is affected by and affects other bodies as a condition of being in this world” (Ahern 13). This connects to Seigworth and Gregg’s assumption that the body is constantly in connection with the outer world, it is in a state of flux with bodies and historical constructs.

Gregg uses the synonym of “force or forces of encounter” (2); it is the forceful intensity within the body that defines affect. Affect is both “intimate and impersonal” (Seigworth and Gregg 2). She emphasises the importance of the body when contextualising affect. Affect shapes the body and is part of its “perpetual becoming” (3). The author attests that affect
transcends “firm distinctions” (3), it is a concept that moves far beyond what can be defined. I argue that the inherent subjectivity within the concept of affect, emotions, and feelings further complicates the process of finding a definition. The reason for this is that, first, the body, as an entity, as a cultural construct, as a concept within fields of studies, needs to be defined. The cultural idea behind the body that is implemented here is that it is always embedded within a system (of power) and in relation to other forces. Spinoza proclaims that “[n]o one has yet determined what the body can do” (87; in: Seigworth and Gregg 3). In “Parables for the Virtual”, Massumi writes “When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels” (1). The body’s movement refers to the inner forces on the body, while it is always experiencing emotions and affects. The mind and the body are closely connected, they interact with and depend on each other, according to Massumi.

I agree with Wehrs’ statement that mind and body are two concepts that have too long been viewed as dualist, until new research around 1970 uncovered that without emotions the body would not function as it does; both the body and the mind are intricately connected. From the 1970s to the 1990s humanities researchers have made it their aim to draw attention to the hierarchies that pervaded our lives. Here, “two broad objectives were pursued: first, the unmasking of illegitimate, oppressive linguistic and cultural signifying practices and forms; second, the recovery or championing of literature, art, and popular culture that challenged or subverted such claims and representations” (Wehrs 3). These aims are clearly represented in affect theory.

Affect is treated as the prime site or engine of liberating subversion, or as the place where oppressive “nurturing” does its work. By contrast, neurocognitive and evolutionary criticism situates affect within contexts of “nature/nurture” mutual modifications. Still, for both discourses, affect denotes sensations, intensities, valences, attunements, dissonances, and interior movements shaped by pressures, energies, and affiliations embedded within or made part of diverse forms of embodied human life. (Wehrs 3)

According to Clough, “for Massumi the turn to affect is about opening the body to its indeterminacy, the indeterminacy of autonomic responses. It is therefore necessary for Massumi to define affect in terms of its autonomy from conscious perception and language, as well as emotion. He proposes that if conscious perception is to be understood as the narration of affect—as it is in the case of emotion, for example—there nonetheless always is “a never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder”; “a virtual remainder: an excess of affect” (in: Clough
According to Clough, from a conscious and cognitive experience, the “turn to the body’s indeterminacy” (ibid.) is not “a return to a ‘pre-social’ body” (ibid.; Massumi 2002, 25), but the body is in itself is social without end; it is “social in a manner ‘prior to’ the separating out of individuals” (Massumi 9; in: Clough 209). Affect is deeply stored in our lives, it is “bodily memory” (Clough 209) that is temporal in the sense that “past action and contexts are conserved and repeated, autonomically reactivated but not accomplished; begun but not completed” (Massumi 30; in: ibid.). Still, affect is never concrete but defined through its autonomy.

As implicit form, affect is potential that as soon as it begins to take form dissolves back into complexity across all levels of matter, as quantum effects feed the indeterminacy appropriate to each level—the subatomic, the physical, the biological, and the cultural. As Massumi sees it, quantum indeterminacy puts affect at every level of matter such that the distinctions of living and non-living, the biological and the physical, the natural and the cultural begin to fade. (Massumi 37; in: ibid. 210)

The omnipresence of affect questions manmade constructs and borders such as notions of nature vs. culture and living vs. non-living. As these concepts are embedded in our culture, the notion of affect questions the hypotheses and ideas about society which have been accepted for a long time. The affective turn follows the linguistic turn. The affective turn is a “substantive shift in that it returned critical theory and cultural criticism to bodily matter, which had been treated in terms of various constructionisms under the influence of poststructuralism and deconstruction” (Clough 206). Now, turning to affect leaves the theory with a focus on “bodily matter and matter generally” (ibid.), how the matter itself is capable of organizing itself in the process of being informational (cf. ibid.).

Affect is always experienced in the “inbetweenness”, it destabilizes embodiment, that is neither definable nor determinable. Even with a definition of the body, Gregg claims that “there never will be” a “generalizable theory of affect” (Seigworth and Gregg 3), but only a multitude of theories that are all “as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds” (4). She reasons that affect moves between the lines of what scholars perceive, it lies between the body and the world (cf. ibid. 17). Massumi exemplifies this inbetweenness in his essay “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact” by stating that fear (especially the fear of threat), as an affect does not have to be factual in order to be felt and believed. Threat is a constant affect that “passes through linear time but does not belong to it. It belongs to the nonlinear circuit of the always will have been” (ibid. 54).
Massumi argues that threat is an affect that possesses a different kind of logic, it functions in the liminal space between the possible action of one or the other. He states that “[a] threat can have specificity and lead to decisive preemptive actions with a corresponding level of specificity without having “real substance” or objective ‘credibility.’” (ibid. 59). If actions are taken in response to the threat, even though the danger is later revoked, the action is still seen as justified in certain cases (cf. ibid.). Using the example of the two novels that represent the Juárez murders, the threat looms both in the private and the public sphere. Even though, the danger depicted in *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* is factual, the invisibility that is created through the state and other institutional forces creates the appearance of peace in the inner political world, while it is visible on the victims of the femicides.

### 2.1. Literary Importance

To contextualise the discussion, Vallelly refers to the special atmosphere within literature that he terms its “thingness” (46), the aspect that makes it “eventful” (46). Analysing literature through affective techniques enables analysts to understand and “re-think the materiality of literature” (49) and how we as readers are part of the literary “materiality” (ibid.). In his article “(Non-)Belief in Things: Affect Theory and a New Literary Materialism”, Vallelly uses the standpoint of New Materialism, which questions the divisions between categories such as human/animal, individual/machine, and other concepts that have before been constructed as dualist, separated concepts. This is possible through the process of reading fiction, which allows readers to empathise with non-existing characters, while their affective experiences and their “reservoir of emotional experience” still remain the same, according to Blake (cf. Blake 224). Meaning that even if the character’s story lies outside of the readers’ affective experiences, their personal repertoire is used to understand the fictional events. Authors such as Baldwin and Faulkner use this knowledge to facilitate a white readership’s understanding of discriminatory processes against minority groups (cf. ibid. 225). “As a result, these works by challenging readers to acknowledge that affective attunement precedes in-group/out-group division, foster the realization that a racist society falsifies embodied experience in ways that deeply undermine individual and group flourishing” (Blake 225). Literature facilitates a White understanding of Black experiences, which would have not been accessible to a majority group.

Literature’s distinct form facilitates awareness of surroundings without using “visual and aural cues” (ibid. 226). Gibbs supports this view by arguing that our bodily chemistry is changed as well as our notions and ideas of life through reading fiction and experiencing new affects (cf. 193). Thus, literature’s poetic function can be used to reach a multitude of readers
and expand their realm of reality by showing them a narrator or character who experiences a different reality than their lived one.

Literary studies scholar Vallely sees literature as verb-like, as a procedure, something that unravels itself along with the readership’s active participation within the interpretation. He states that “literary materials and human materiality are caught up in one another, and the significance of this affective correspondence lies in neither the physical object nor the social world but in the energy of the correspondence itself” (Vallely 56). Thus, he focuses on how the reader and the literary text effect/affect each other, how they interchange with each other, and how each reader perceives a text differently while the text thrives and grows through this process, continuously gaining new interpretative angles.

Ahern furthers Vallely’s point by stating that

> [c]ritical attention to the circulations of affect in and outside the text entails just such attunements to the contingencies of bodies affecting and affected, to the potentiality immanent in the process of becoming, to an ontology that sees all as interconnected and implies an ethics of relation that opens a space for acknowledgment of multiplicity and respect for difference. (Ahern 18)

As affect moves and is a “circulation” (ibid.) that exists in relation to the outside (and inside) world of those experiencing it, it also always occurs in relation to the environment it exists in (see Vallely 47; Probyn; Miller, Rogers). When reading, the affects we experience enable us to get an insight into other lives and understand experiences that “are discernible through time” (5) and space. Reading and writing are both substantial forms that carry affect with it, we, as humans, are who we are, because we experience life through affect (cf. Probyn 77.).

To contextualise the discussion, Rogers, who analyses fiction that deals with slavery and discrimination against African Americans, argues that “[n]arrative […] can’t ever speak the unspeakable or recover histories forever lost. It can, however, articulate the affect of the past that remains, and draw from the information it provides” (Rogers 214). Thus, their power lies in their agency, they are able to “disrupt dominant structures of feeling, including those related to cultures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity” (ibid.). This is essential for the analysis of representation of the Juárez femicides, as the novels discussed have the potential of showing the dominant world view, and standing as a counter-narrative, which emphasises the processes of silencing in regard with international discourse surrounding the femicides, also dealt with on a meta-level within the novels.
Rogers professes that “affect is political” (ibid.). Fiction, in part, exists to affect readers, and can be instrumentalised to reformulate dominant ideas about certain marginalised groups. Affects can be implemented in certain scenes to convey a political statement and agendas. At the same time sensationalist techniques can be used to achieve the implied reader’s affective involvement. Affect is political, thus, literature, as a medium of knowledge, can be used to further a political cause, and mobilise people (cf. Rogers 202).

One affect in particular exemplifies the potential of affective techniques in literature. Shame is an affect that conveys both the idea that affect always exists in relation to its environment and that affect possesses an experiencing and mediating quality. Additionally, it is essential for the primary texts discussed, where sexualised violence and the shame that often comes with it is thematised and will be analysed. Here, a definition of the body is detrimental in order to analyse how shame affects the body. I will implement the theories by affect studies scholars, whose theory of the body follows the theoretical basis I have already established.

Deleuze states that the body is made up of many components, an assertion that Gatens continues by stating that affect is a concept that makes us question our “commonsense notions of the privacy or ‘integrity’ of bodies” (115), as it shows the cracks in the humanmade constructs and “borders” (ibid.). The culturally constructed differences are, thus, merely constructs, and “the body is ‘always already wholly implicated in its milieu’” (ibid.). Much like the body is in constant interrelation with the world, emotions, affects and feelings are constantly in flux as well and are constantly (re-)connected (cf. Probyn 77).

Probyn focuses on the affect shame, which is as central to the body as it is to the mind. She quotes Deleuze’s analysis that “[t]he mind depends on the body; shame would be nothing without this dependency, this attraction for the abject, this voyeurism of the body. Which means that the mind is ashamed of the body in a very special manner; in fact, it is ashamed for the body” (123). The dualism that occurs here is a process that is noticeable in many cases of trauma, such as sexual or mental abuse; here, the mind and the body are often described by survivors as two disconnected entities (cf. ibid.). Deleuze explains that “[t]he mind begins by coldly and curiously regarding what the body does, it is first of all a witness; then it is affected, it becomes an impassioned witness, that is, it experiences for itself affects that are not simply effects of the body, but veritable critical entities that hover over the body and judge it” (ibid. 124). Probyn explains this citation by stating that for Deleuze affect and emotion are two components that “arise out of a violent collision of mind and body” (ibid.). According to Deleuze, affect is subjective in its very core; however, using the example of shame, this affect is something that is embedded in the social environment, the social and cultural norms that
affect the (subjective) body, and, as Deleuze argues, the society in general. Thus, affect, in Probyn’s case shame, “arises from a collision of bodies, ideas, history, and place” (82).

Shame in the context of the primary literature discussed is important insofar as it is an affect that allows readers to understand how the characters’ lives are embedded in their cultural environment.

3. Postcolonial Approaches

“Arguably, the threat that these women represent is not exclusively to macho cultural values, but to the very ability to deny that these values are the legacy of colonial gendered and racialized violence. Put differently, maintaining the illusion of a “clean and proper” social order is only possible by disavowing this colonial past and, therefore, by marking as social waste those who threaten it.”

—García-Del Moral (43)

Due to the motive of US involvement in Mexico in the selected novels, the postcolonial approach offers a basic understanding of the power relationships between the dominant nation in power and the state. In the context of Mexico, the power system neo-colonialism needs to be discussed, as neoliberal, globalised structures of power are predominantly exercised in the country. The theoretical work of Mbembe surrounding the topic of politics of death, i.e. necropower, will contextualise the discussion in regard to the femicides.

The first characteristic of postcolonial criticism, according to Barry, is “an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral ‘Other’” (187). The second part of postcolonial theory is language, as many scholars have understood language to be a form of identity (cf. 188). Third, Barry argues that postcolonial theory analyses the extenuation of “the Other’s” identity as “double, or hybrid, or unstable” (ibid.). The “stress on ‘cross-cultural’ interactions is a fourth characteristic of postcolonialist criticism” (ibid. 189). “Non-Western knowledge and culture” (Gandhi x) is still persistently othered, while Western traditions and norms are seen as the normative and the “‘self’” (ibid.). According to Madsen, postcolonial theoretical approaches are influential and important when it comes to regions that have been exploited by the dominant (cf. 1). Postcolonial theory examines the colonial past by “revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating” it (Gandhi 4). Even after colonialism ends, norms and power structures are still set in place. Nandy states that it is not only bodies that are changed through colonialism, but also minds. Additionally, colonised societies alter not only their structures but also their thinking, namely “their cultural priorities” (xi) Thus, “[t]he West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds” (ibid.). This way,
knowledge produced by the Other is methodically invalidated and the values of the West are prioritised. In his classic work Lordship and Bondage”, Hegel exemplifies the concept of the “Self-consciousness” (54), which each Self consists of, and which “exists only in being acknowledged” (ibid.). Self-consciousness is an idea that merely exists through the differentiation from the Other, which in turn is subjugated to the Self. The Other creates the Self; thus, the Self could not exist without the Other (cf. ibid.). This can be examined in Said’s analysis of the term “Orientalism”, which he argues is only a European construction, a “European representation” that has been stylised to “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1; in: Burney 41). In turn, postcolonial theory has been used to “deconstruct the structures, processes and means of ‘othering’” (Burney 42; Spivak), to make the invisible visible. To this day, colonialism is still present; however, new and more implicit ways of enforcing power over what is constructed as the Other are employed. For example, industrialisation and globalisation are mechanisms of power that target and exploit so-called developing countries, in order to enrich Western societies (cf. Burney 43).

Undoubtedly, different historical processes apply to each postcolonial nation, but there are similar traits of “linked global political and economic situations arising from the conjoining of the ideologies of white supremacy to the development of global capitalism” (Kim 235). White supremacy is, amongst other definitions, the “presumed superiority and unmarked normalization of whiteness and Euro-American cultures” (ibid.), meaning that Whiteness is in itself not realized as a category, but as the unmarked norm which stands as the grouping that is perceived to be superior in a Western society. As aforementioned, the normative category enforces its own society onto the Other; however, in postcolonial notions there are new ways of enforcing the self’s power onto the Other, as will be elaborated in the next section.

3.1. Necropolitics

The state’s power to enforce rules and norms is especially important in the context of discriminatory techniques. Necropolitics is a concept coined by Mbembe who claims “that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes” (11). Necropolitics defines “politics as a ‘work of death’” (ibid. 12), arguing that political power is then most influential when it decides over mortality (cf. Mbembe. 12). Human existence is instrumentalized and bodies as well as whole groups of people are destroyed for the sake of power (cf. 13).
Mbembe uses Foucault’s concept of biopower, which “function[s] through dividing people into those who must live and those who must die” (ibid. 17); this “power defines itself in relation to a biological field” (ibid.) in which it operates. “This control presupposes the distribution of human species into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others” (ibid.). Foucault’s concept of biopower refers to a new way of governing through covert mechanisms that allow the state the “old sovereign right of death” (Foucault 214; in Mbembe 17) without governing the population through “the fear of death” (cf. Wright 709). Using the example of racism, “[i]n the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state […] [It is] the […] acceptability of putting to death” (228; in: ibid.). Now the question arises as to how this concept differentiates from Mbembe’s necropolitical stance. Mbembe analyses former colonial states and “more politically volatile states” (Wright ibid.) and argues that the concept of biopower does not suffice to analyse new systems of oppression and exploitation (cf. 39). These examples enable us to see political oppression as “a form of war” (ibid. 12), where power is in the hands of those who decide about the mortality of certain (sub-)groups of people. Thus, a central part of states is the reproduction and meaning of death (Mbembe 16; in: ibid.). One important aspect is the state’s capability of defining some lives as valuable, while others are constructed as unworthy and their deaths are justified through publicly accepted discourses (cf. Wright 709).

Even though Mbembe and Foucault focus their analysis on racial aspects, necropolitics are applicable to the exploitation and devaluation of women. It is the poetess Anzaldúa who states that “the Mexicana is devalued and her cultural integrity is defiled” (3), in the “divided border geography of the postcolonial period” (ibid.). The discourse that “assembly plants rely on a disposable female population that must perform highly technical and specific work […] keeping the production line moving twenty-four hours a day” (Barberán Reinares 64) has been “‘institutionalised’” (ibid.).

The consequences of neo-colonialism for women are severe. Due to a decrease of wages and employment for men in Mexico, women are forced to find employment and provide for their family both in the private and in the public sphere. This “lengthened their work days and induced a pattern of self-exploitation” (Wilson 11). Capitalist and patriarchal mechanisms in the work field prioritise male workers, while female workers earn less, which “is also a form of structural violence” (ibid.).

The above-mentioned concepts are used within the two novels in order to convey the affect of destituteness, of feeling homeless and inferior, due to the characters’ economic, social,
and cultural background. Here, the important aspect is that some victims are constructed as valuable and moral, while others are not. For example, in *Desert Blood*, those born on American soil are more likely to have securer jobs and a safer environment when growing up. In contrast, female immigrants in Juárez in particular face structural violence, unsafe working regulations and the constant danger of femicides. The murders have gone to such an extent that researchers such as Monárrez Fragoso have termed them as “systematic sexual feminicide and intimate feminicide” (2010) Through structural and economic regulations that actively disadvantage poor, female POC with a migratory background, the ones in power are able to choose between the life and death of the citizens.

4. Intersectional Approaches

“The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains.”
—Anzaldua (87)

This chapter will interlace affect and postcolonial theory with the intersectional approaches by Hill Collins and Williams Crenshaw. It functions as an attempt to embed the two chapters discussed so far into a larger context, namely the literary discussion of affective techniques. Using Pepper’s analysis of the feminization of labour contextualises this chapter, as it brings together the main topics and grounds them into the context of femicides.

According to Hill Collins, intersectionality is used to comprehend the world, humans, and their lives, in all its intricacies (24). It is “an analytical tool [that] can help clarify events and social inequalities that reappear through six core ideas: inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice” (ibid.). Intersectionality breaks up the belief of homogeneity in humans and creates the basis for a discussion about the interconnection between the social categories of “race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others” (15), and how these categories influence the social, economic, and political standing of people. While some draw profits, others suffer from marginalisation and inequality. Nash states that it is “[t]he notion that identity is formed by interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (3).

Intersectionality as a term was coined by Williams Crenshaw in 1995 upon the emergence of a case where women of colour were discriminated against due to their race and
gender, but legally there were no laws that could draw consequences. She distinguishes structural and political intersectionality. While the first term refers to the “convergence of systems of race, gender and class discrimination resulting in women being subjugated in particular ways” (Muñoz 10), the latter highlights “the points of intersection of multiple oppressions, the relative positioning of the subordinated groups, and the conflicting political agendas of the multiple groups to which oppressed subjects belong” (ibid.). The discrimination against women of colour was not connected to either the feminist or the anti-racist standpoint. Thus, an understanding of the interconnection between race and gender had to be established in order to tackle issues related to economic and social injustice, such as structural violence and inequality on the job market. As revolutionary as it has been celebrated, Crenshaw’s research has been criticised insofar as it excludes the voices of those who are not black, but still belong to other marginalised groups of people. Thus, new categories have been added and the research in the field of intersectionality has been manifold. The binary distinction between black and white and female and male has been criticised and is being discussed critically by many scholars. Even though it has clear advantages, such as a simplification of analysis, I argue that by only focusing on the binarism of two categories, there is again the neglect of those that are within or even outside a spectrum (especially in the case of female/male, old/young, marginalised/not marginalised).

One definite advantage of intersectional readings of discrimination is that it enables a context-oriented reading of power (cf. Cabrera 44). This stems from the idea that the systems of oppression are multiple and simultaneous (patriarchal, consumer capitalism, racial supremacy, heterosexual supremacy). Crenshaw stresses that “structural domination” (1245) is a concept that shows the “multilayered and routinized forms of domination” (ibid.). Using the example of violence against black women, she states that due to the intersection of subordinate categories they are more defenceless against (sexualised) exploitation. The author further states that the multiple forms of discrimination hinder women to “create alternatives to the abusive relationships” that posited them in their current situations” (cf. ibid).

4.1. Defining and Contextualising Intersectionality

A critical analysis of the field intersectionality is important in order to understand that the field should be in constant movement and alter itself to adjust to the contemporary and ever-changing notions of identity and discrimination. A clear definition of intersectionality is in need to invigorate a field that should give a platform to each unheard voice. Here, Nash criticises
the lack of a clearly defined intersectional methodology, the use of black women as prototypical intersectional subjects, the ambiguity inherent to the definition of intersectionality, and the coherence between intersectionality and lived experiences of multiple identities. (4)

By focusing on intersectional discriminatory aspects, new and often more concrete power structures come to light. For example, maquiladora workers in Mexico work in a space that is “exempt from tariffs and other taxes. Young [poor] women left their families to find a way to survive and to escape patriarchy. The border is an area where laws are broken, identities are renegotiated, and the contradictions between two dissimilar countries collide to construct and de-construct women's subjectivities and bodies” (Taylor 359). All these aspects interlace and create a multitude of discriminatory aspects.

Most scholars agree with the argument that the intersection of “class, gender, sexuality and race” (Muñoz Cabrera 22) is a predominant factor in the negligent behaviour surrounding the femicides and systematic violence in Juárez. Muñoz Cabrera emphasises that “[w]omen’s bodies are the site where the bodily injuries inflicted by hegemonic male power are most palpable” (36), which exponentially increases in Latin America where violence against women is unrestricted and left with impunity (cf. ibid.; cf. Drysdale 48) both in the public and the private sphere. The institutionalisation and structural nature of violence opens the doors for neglect and tolerance of and even active participation in the violence. In Desert Blood, the aspect of sexual identity, in the sense of transgender/cross-dressing, is emphasised throughout some parts of the novel and is another criterion of intersectionality that is often missing in the discourse around inequality, namely the category queer.

To create a connection to the analytical part, in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”, Crenshaw states that “burdens” such as “poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills” (Crenshaw 1245f.) are “largely the consequence of gender and class oppression” (ibid 1246). This is precisely the argument that If I Die in Juárez makes. Reinares argues that there is a clear distinction between “victims of sexual violence who receive attention and action and those ignored because of their worthlessness in terms of class and race within the current neoliberal model” (52). She continues to point out that “[t]he insignificance of the abject presence of subaltern third-world is paradoxical in light of the fact that they have now been turned into a key component for the global economic engine to run smoothly” (ibid.). Additionally, Ponzanesi analyses that the violence committed against women in public—as is the case in Juárez—questions the clear distinction between the public and private sphere (1). Especially poor female migrants working
in Maquiladoras, thus, undermining the traditional gender roles, are vulnerable to exploitative mechanisms and structural violence. True, a Marxist feminist scholar, posits that through the “feminisation of poverty especially among unskilled and marginalised poor women in developing countries who lack access to productive resources or public services” (cf. ibid. 45) violence against this stratum is especially severe. This means that the economic exploitation that is practiced is visible on the bodies of those that experience it. Not only the double burden faced by women who juggle between the private and public sphere, but also the “gender-based violence associated with displacement of populations, sex trafficking, home-based production, restrictive immigration and exploitation of local and migrant workers especially around special economic zones and large developments” (ibid. 46), as Juárez is. This is essential insofar as the novel Desert Blood, and to some extent If I Die in Juárez, thematise this exploitation within the trading zone of Juárez. The topic of women working within a male-dominated field in a patriarchal society is affectively charged especially for those whose culture persists on restrictive gender roles.

For analytical purposes, this approach opens up the discussion to a more connected and inter-reliant conception of power, discrimination and inequality, as opposed to focusing only on one aspect of discrimination. This intersectional approach criticises thinking in binaries, as the consequence is simplification and one-dimensionality, while intersectionality is not static or simplistic.

As already mentioned, a group always identifies itself over the existence of the Other. Our identities depend on this idea in order to construct, deconstruct, and experience the self as it is. Through power structures and structural techniques of domination, some groups are defined as the dominant, while others are marginalised. Thus, an intersectional lens shows that only through the interconnectedness of all culturally, historically, and socially constructed attributes and the conjunction of all modes of discrimination and power yield an understanding of how oppression is (re-)enforced and how to overcome it.
5. The Gendered Body

“Rather, her presence in the night points toward a cultural decline within which her death, a form of absence, can be logically anticipated.”
—Wright (129)

The body as a predominant theme runs through this thesis like a golden thread, it weaves its way through the dualism between the mind and the body, through the postcolonial body, and the topic of intersectionality. In this chapter, I will delve into the topic of the gendered body. The theoretical basis that will be discussed is that gender is ascribed onto the body, which is the place where societal and cultural notions are realized. It is important insofar as the body is an essential idea within the works discussed in the analytical part.

Butler is important in this context since her theory is essential for the field of the gendered body and the politicization and construction of the body. However, she will be discussed along with more recent research on the construction of the female Mexican body by Moral.

According to Butler, the subject is “invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not ‘show’ once the juridical structure of politics has been established” (5). She argues that “the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation” (5). She posits that the essentialisation of existing power structures onto the body, make discriminatory behaviour invisible. Thus, power is used as a tool of production of what “it claims merely to represent” (ibid.). Butler claims that categories themselves are “produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought”, she uses the category “women”, which she states is not a representing category (cf. ibid.). This term seems to “denote […] a common identity” (6), but it “has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (ibid.). She continues to suggest that

the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. (ibid.)
The idea of intersectionality transcends into feminist categories and questions the self-ascription of those fighting for marginalised groups. Butler explains that through the categorisation of “woman”, gender cannot be extracted from intersections between many domains anymore, and it keeps being reproduced and sustained (cf. ibid.). “The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination” (Butler 6). Thus, the belief of universality, be it womanhood or patriarchal norms, is highly criticised as a simplification and fictionalisation of societal truths (ibid.).

[T]he insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of “women” are constructed. (ibid. 19f.)

Similar to the construction of categories such as “feminine” and “women”, Butler argues in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body” (519) and how humans act, move and gesture with their bodies, forms an illusion of “an abiding gendered self” (ibid.). Thus, gender, is merely a construct, “a performative accomplishment” (520), that is watched by society, and, according to Butler, can be likened to a theatrical performance, where the “stylized repetition of acts through time” (ibid.) forms an identity that is constructed to be essential and rooted in biology.

Butler includes Merleau-Ponty’s definition of “the body […] as […] an [sic!] historical idea” and “a set of possibilities to be continually realized” (521), which

means that it gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world. That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. (ibid.)

Butler states that “the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities” (ibid.). Here, Butler refers to the fact that every choice people make with their body have consequences and can or cannot produce change or (re-)produce discriminatory norms.

She continues to state that
an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation, as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation. (Butler 521)

Gender is a performance, in which “embodied agents” (ibid.) are turned outward, there to be seen by others. However, more important embodiment is a way of displaying “a set of strategies” (ibid.) which are grounded in history. Womanhood is a construct, where the self has “to compel the body to conform to an [sic!] historical idea of ‘woman’, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (ibid. 522).

Gender is performative and has “punitive consequences” (ibid.), meaning that the subversion of what is considered to be the norm, performing in a non-acceptable way, is punished. Interestingly, however, gender is merely constructed and only the existence of the performance generates what we consider to be the right behaviour for a gender. If the performance stops, then gender stops to exist as well (cf. ibid.).

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress. (ibid.)

By performing human beings essentialise the very construct. The reinforcement of what is culturally and socially learnt is subsequently naturalised through the performance itself. As the construct is intricate and has been (re-)produced for centuries, gender has become part of humans’ identities. Butler sees the body as constructed to be inherently gendered. “[T]he body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (ibid. 523). She disagrees with viewing the gendered body as essential, natural, or factual.

To sum up, the body is a political entity where gendered processes are (re-)produced. In particular, the female body, the Other, is a battleground for norms and rules. Most importantly, Butler emphasises that the body, much like sex and gender, is merely a construct that is used in order to support discriminatory political and social ideologies.
5.1. The Sexualised Other

“Geschlechtscharaktere” (Eng. gender characteristics) is a concept defined by Hausen, who defines them as a term used for the physiological characteristics that allegedly corresponded and still correspond with the psychological gender characteristics (cf. 363). Hausen argues that the interactions between individuals are neither dependent on situational context in which subjective behaviour decisions are conceptualised nor are they determined through material practical constraints. However, she states that social behaviour orientates itself by culturally defined behaviour patterns and norms that are followed and controlled due to a social consensus (ibid.). This means that each human interaction and decision are preconstructed through cultural and social norms which are historically embedded in our society.

Hausen closely examines the attributes that are linked to being female and male, i.e. what it means to be a man or a woman in a society where categories are essentialised and naturalised. In an article in Meyer, she posits that while the category male is defined as the individual, female is referred to as universality (ibid.). Here, already, the binary opposition of the two constructed genders is visible. The article continues to characterise individuality and, thus, men as being self-sufficient, forceful, full of energy, and antagonistic. The female is defined as co-dependent, vague, indeterminant, devoted, and sympathetic (cf. ibid. 367).

The gender characteristics are formulated through socialisation and nurture. Psychological attributes are integrated into the body and justify the segregation of female and male domains, i.e. the private (female) and the public (male). Through the characterisation of male as rational, active, and dominant, the public is conceptualised as the male sphere, while the emotional, passive and submissive Other is removed from the public and connected to the private, reproductive sphere (cf. ibid.). The characteristics that are embedded on the genders are, much like the construction of the two genders, binary opposites. The homogenisation of the two genders is essentialist and sees the people within one gender characteristically as the same (cf. ibid. 370). The framework focuses on the attributes and constructs them as consistent, homogeneous, persistent, and pervasive. The gender characteristics are the ideological justification and validation of the patriarchal system, in order to further privilege men over women. It is increasingly used in order to justify discrimination against women, political, socially, and culturally (ibid.). These concepts are the basis for research in the field of gendered domains.

Through the concretely essentialist argumentation, the bodies and minds of women are constructed as lacking in qualities, and as being biologically inferior to the bodies and minds of
men (cf. ibid.). In “Feminist Philosophy” and the “Turn to Affect”: A Genealogical Critique” Fischer gives a brief overview of the feminist study’s turn to affect theory, showing that the deconstruction of concepts such as the dualism between body/mind and the gendering of feelings and emotions were and are analyses used by feminist scholars. Affects such as anger and guilt possess political power and agency in the hands of some, while they discredit bodies of those belonging to minority groups (cf. 4). Analysing Hausen from this approach, I argue that she can be interpreted as implementing affective techniques as well. Her categories are highly socially, politically, and historically constructed and ascribed onto the gendered body. They are themselves affectively charged by notions of right/wrong, nature/nurture and nature/culture. Her analysis of the categorisation used on women and men, even though it certainly focuses on gender binaries constructed in the 18th century, still allows an explanation of why these categories are used, and which ideas (re-)construct and justify essentialist images of gender (cf. Hausen). Here, I argue that Hausen’s approach allows an analysis of affective techniques insofar as it depicts the affective justifications behind the constructs and questions normalised constructs within our society.

To embed these Western concepts from the 20th century into a more contemporary frame, it is essential to choose intersectional research. Hausen and especially Butler state that the female body is constructed by the dominant category; they are, in consequence created by an outside source, “formed ‘outside the domain of the subject’” (Butler 3, in: Taylor 351). Taylor’s focus of research in her article “Abject Bodies of The Maquiladora Female Workers on a Globalized Border” is the construction of female Mexican bodies as valuable or worthless. The perceived abundance of women migrating to Mexico for work renders their bodies disposable, as they become “unworthy objects” (ibid. 352). The border region is a neo-colonial system, in which women are valued according to “social class, ethnicity and appearance” (ibid.), and, according to Taylor, their bodies are “worthless in a society that looks only for profit” (ibid.). Economically, the Mexican woman is perceived as “waste in the making” (Comaroff and Comaroff 126), as she lessens in value for the company as soon as she starts working. Her “value never appreciates into skill” (ibid.) but the value is lost over time, it is consumed and then lost. She “personifies waste in the making, as the materials of her body gain shape through the discourses that explain how she is untrainable, unskilled, and always a temporary work” (ibid. 126). Here, Hausen’s analysis of gender roles comes in, as male workers are perceived as valuable due to their skilled labour, while female workers are merely seen in their context as mothers and workers, who do not gain but lose potential. “Her life is stilled as her departure from the workplace represents the corporate death that results logically
from her demise, since at some point the accumulation of the waste within her will offset the value of her labor” (ibid. 127). This argument is especially present in *Desert Blood*, where female workers are defined through their biological capability of pregnancy. The Mexican woman is, thus, always reduced to her body, and only gains temporary emancipation through the job market, as her body does not bear economic worth for the companies that employ it.

5.2. The Worthy and the Unworthy

Similar to Hausen’s analysis of male and female ascriptions, and Taylor, Comaroff and Comaroff’s analyses of the sexualised female Mexican worker, García-del Moral analyses the construction of womanhood within the context of victimhood. In “Representation as a Technology of Violence: On the Representation of the Murders and Disappearances of Aboriginal Women in Canada and Women in Ciudad Juárez” she examines “the relationship between the representation of violence and the violence of representation” (García-del Moral 33). In this article, she closely looks at the construction of women as (im-)moral, and the justification of murder on the basis of morality and disposability. She states that especially in media “representation of violence against women, newsworthiness is invariably linked to the discursive production of “worthy” and “unworthy victim” (ibid. 35).

Her argument is that women, who are constructed as “immoral” are additionally seen as “worthless and disposable” (Moral 42). According to Moral, “‘Moral’ behaviour here is not exclusively tied to women's sexuality, but to women's access to the labour market” (ibid.).

Much research has been conducted on the topic of the feminisation of labor and its association with violence against women; the cultural separation between private and public spheres functions as a justification for a woman’s restriction to the household, and their consequent cultural devaluation. Women entering the public sphere are seen as disturbing gender roles in the sense that they are transcending well-established codes within a patriarchal society (cf. Tiano. 74ff.). Hence, the violence committed is blamed on the victims themselves, as they are constructed as morally lose (cf. Nathan 26; in: Moral 42), and “leading the ‘double life’ of chaste factory work by day and sinful bar-hopping by night” (ibid. 43). Moral quotes Zermefio, who states that economically independent women were met by “wounded machismo” (58; in: ibid.), which creates a “backlash against the perceived ‘cultural decline’ embodied in women’s participation in the labour force” (Wright; in: ibid.), exemplified through the negligence of authorities regarding the investigations of the femicides. Moral states that
“discourses of morality and immorality work to organize gender relations in the context of Ciudad Juárez as a border city whose economy depends on the maquila industry and the sex trade. Although women's involvement in both is a reality in Ciudad Juárez, she argues that this participation is ultimately punished in that it represents a threat to a macho gender order that has its origins in colonial gendered and racialized violence” (ibid. 44).

This is especially true for the novel If I Die in Juárez, which contextualises sexualised violence as influenced by machismo culture. Similar to Hausen and Butler, Moral states that boundaries between the self and the other, the worthy and the unworthy, are fragile and weak in their very core; thus, their existence relies on the constant restructuring and reproduction. “Yet the construction of some women as disposable and as deserving victims is not purely discursive” (Moral 35). Their bodies, mutilated, raped, and beaten are the very materialisation of the discourse that some women, those who are considered to be unworthy, will not be able to escape violence (cf. ibid.). According to Hernandez Castillo, “from the perspective of a patriarchal ideology that considers women as sexual objects and bearers of family honor, rape, sexual torture, and mutilation are mechanisms for attacking enemy men” (153). Due to the reason that women earn their own living in maquiladoras, some scholars argue that this “may undermine private patriarchy within the family by eroding the forces that kept women at home and economically dependent on males. At the same time, wives who show their independence though their economic activities and control of personal income may face a violent backlash” (Wilson 12). Luévano analyses the femicides and also concludes that part of the reason was men trying to “reassert their machismo” (72).

The aforementioned differentiation between public and private, and male and female, is useful in the case of this thesis as it shows that the subversion of these concepts questions manmade constructs. In Juárez, once women leave the home in order to earn a wage in manufacturing companies, the city feels “the shame that it was built by women who worked outside the home” (Cordoba; in: Wright 713). One reason for this is that the connotation of working women as sex workers is deeply ingrained in society (cf. Eisenhamber; Wright; True). Prostitution is legal in Juárez and not contained to certain areas. However, the gender roles that are deeply ingrained in the Mexican society and patriarchal in its very nature have created a discourse of disposability around working women, both in prostitution and in the maquila industry. Many scholars agree that this is why institutional forces in Mexico have blamed the femicides on the promiscuity of prostitutes and the public discourse around the murders shows that “the deaths of public women represent a kind of public cleansing, as the removal of
troublesome women restores the moral and political balance of society” (Wright 713). Therefore, the victims’ bodies are used “as a way to substantiate the politics based on patriarchal notions of normality” (ibid.). Claiming that prostitution is the cause for the violence committed against women, rationalises the violence insofar as if the source of the violence is eradicated, then the murder is justified (cf. ibid.). The murdered girls and women are “position[ed] […] in the political order; it was a pillar of the necropolitics demonstrating that the publicness of the victims, as evidenced by the corpses’ location in public places and the mutilations of their raped bodies, caused the violence that was disrupting the social and political peace of northern Mexico” (Wright 714f.). This way, women are again pushed back into the private sphere, as those who do not adhere to patriarchal norms, are not protected within the system. Additionally, Arriola, who analyses the murders committed against Mexican women in “Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras”, sees the guilt in the social construction of the Mexican woman’s body. “Her body may have been abducted and grossly violated by whoever found an easy target that morning, but the life preceding her brutal killing had already been defined as insignificant: a fleck in the fabric of global production” (55).

Wilson argues that “women come to be undervalued and viewed as somehow inferior throughout the city just as they are at work” (11). She concludes that violence on a structural level is the joining together of “(neo)patriarchal and machista ideologies and practices in the public arena and the drive for capitalist accumulation” (12). Caputi emphasises in “Making a Killing”, a book that exclusively researches the femicides in Juárez, that the “disorder and contamination in Juárez (and other cities with a legacy of colonialist exploitation)” (288) is not because of its “‘unclean’ women” (ibid.) but due to political and social injustices.

These theoretical inputs are essential for the analysis of the novel, as they embed the main topic, namely the femicides of poor, young, female workers in a theoretical groundwork that allows an analytical engagement with the primary texts. The theories allow a visualization of intersectional processes that discriminate against the novels’ characters, and further enable a discussion of the cultural constructs that are embedded within the bodies of those present in the texts.
Affective Representation of Femicides in Primary Texts

6. A Look at the Generic Conventions

6.1. Intertextual Devices in Desert Blood

Gaspar de Alba uses the detective genre, which is “often based on the need to restore a social order through the solving of crime or mystery” (18f.; in Mata 22) in a more modernized way. Instead of implementing the hegemonic style of the genre, the author chooses it in order “to understand the shifting political, social, cultural, and identitarian terrain of the post-nationalist period” (ibid.). I argue that the primary function of the detective fiction in this context is the creation of tension and suspense. Additionally, it affects readers by making graspable the situations of the real events, in a fictional environment. Through affective techniques, the suffering and pain experienced by the victims and survivors can be witnessed by the implied reader through affect. Revilla states that Gaspar de Alba’s text is “a text that is neither solely academic nor purely fiction” (132).

However, the detective novel in particular, creates and adds a further level of tension and suspense, namely the quest for the missing character, in this case, Irene, Ivon’s [the main character] sister. Familiarising the characters with the implied reader emotionally charges the quest for the kidnapped girl, as the implied reader becomes emotionally and affectively involved. As this novel is “based on four years of research into the crimes and a lifetime of personal experience in the social, political, economic, and cultural infrastructure of the U.S.-Mexico border that makes it possible for such crimes to take place with impunity” (DB v), the author’s aim is to “expose the horrors of this deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the English-speaking public, and to offer some conjecture, based on research, based on what I know about that place on the map, some plausible explanation for the silence that has surrounded the murders” (DB iv). Stating her intentions in the beginning of the text facilitates a reading for the “beneath” (Ahern 14), the in-between-ness. It allows an analysis of the affective level that the text evokes within the readers, which is created in order to represent the femicides in a fictional form. One more device that is repeatedly made use of to spread awareness of the brutality as well as contextualise the events, is intertextuality.

Within Desert Blood intertextual devices are used to a) situate the novel in a scholarly field and b) represent its (alleged) factuality. Already the first chapter opens with the newspaper article, “The Maquiladora Murders”, allowing a brief introduction to the crimes. Ivon is informed about the femicides, a topic she had been oblivious about. Reading a feature of the
femicides in the magazine Ms. on the airplane on her way to Juárez allows the implied reader to learn about the topic along with the protagonist. Here the basis for the storyline is revealed by giving an outline of the femicides. Suspects and murder counts are stated; thus, readers without background knowledge are informed about the murders and the investigative situation. Starting with a newspaper article levels both the protagonist and the implied reader into the topic. Now, both have the same level of knowledge and the learning process if manifold.

Additionally, the lack of awareness of the main character, who is also a gender studies professor, symbolises the invisibility of the crimes. Similar to the purpose of postcolonial theory, the novel spreads awareness by shedding lights on structuralised crimes that are kept secret and invisible by those committing them and profiting from them.

The main reason Ivon, who lives and works in the US, travels to her place of birth, El Paso is the fact that she is searching for a surrogate mother, whose child she is able to adopt with her partner Brigit. However, after the first surrogate mother, Cecilia, is brutally murdered and the second, Elsa, is impregnated against her will—and allegedly sexually violated by her company doctor while he examined her for a mandatory pregnancy test—Ivon realizes that the waves of femicides are more personal than she could have imagined.

Through fiction, the implied author is able to create tension, as well as affect the implied reader by creating empathy for characters. Thus, the first murder described in the article is of a “15-year-old assembly plant worker who was reported missing by a family member five days ago” (DB 28). By embedding real events and existing groups (such as “Mujeres Sin Fronteras”), the fictionalised account is elevated into a more scientific and factual position. This is further achieved by the detailed description of places and roads in Juárez. This evokes the image of factuality, rather than fictionality, which again draws the reader closer in affectively. However, the novel is fictionalised, and fiction and facts are blurred indeed; facts are embedded in fiction, rather than vice versa. For example, theories of the potential murderers are included within the fictional text.

Ivon shook her head. “We talked to a bartender at a place on La Mariscal and she told us about these men with video cameras who came into the bar one night and took one of the girls whose body was found ten days later. Video cameras in a brothel, sounds like pornography to me.”

“Well, that’s one theory,” said Rubí. “We have lots of theories. It’s pornography, it’s the black market for human organs, it’s a serial killer crossing over from El Paso, it’s the police, it’s a Satanic cult.” (DB 224)
These theories are existing theories, embedded into a fictional account. Frequently, articles are embedded by characters reading them. “Reading on airplanes didn’t bother her usually, but that article on the murdered women of Juárez had unsettled her” (DB 3). This forms a connection between the brutality of the events and the emotions of the characters, who are frequently affected by the articles and those reported missing or murdered. In turn, the emotions processed by the characters within the novel are then experienced by the implied reader. For example, the victims’ personal connection to Ivon emotionally involves the implied reader. Thus, the murders are not only committed against the characters’ bodies, but they become personalised, they transcend the borders of public and private, and cause suffering in the community as well as the private sphere of those living in the fictionalised account of Juárez. Within the novel, this structural injustice is clearly broken down to the personal level in order to bring the events closer to the reader and affect the reader. Here, of course, the detective novel plays an essential role, as it allows to create a case, which facilitates an affective investment within the novel and the fictionalised events of the femicides.

The deep entrenchment of sexualised social norms can be seen in the way institutional forces treat victims and survivors alike. In the missing person report and the subsequent flyer of Irene, the authorities and people in town urge the mother to construct her daughter as innocent as to not evoke the image of guilt through attractiveness. The discourse of (im-)morality is one that is present in both novels. Father Francis [the priest who helps in the search for Irene] chooses to use a picture of Irene in which she looks more innocent, rationalising his decision by stating, “I’m not passing judgment on anyone’s life, Ivon. I just know how people react, and if they see a picture of someone that to them looks like a prostitute, they won’t have sympathy for her. They’ll just think she was a bad girl and she got what she deserved” (DB 179). Here it can be seen, that authorities as well as the depicted society in the novel blame the victims and construct the image of lose girls and women, whose carelessness results in dangerous situations and murder. Their immorality is the reason their lives are ended, this allows the discourse of cleansing to spread, meaning that those who are killed are merely a symptom that needs to be quenched to distinguish the disease of lawlessness. Those who are constructed as immoral, are seen as worthy victims. The topic of disposability will be revisited repeatedly in the analytical part.

The inescapability of the murders is represented in Chapter 45 through the article “Holding the Line, Twenty-One-Gun Salute for Slain Officers”. While reading, Ivon realises that the Border Patrol, whose officers are personally involved in the murdering of women, are protected by their powerful status. Those who are guilty of her sister’s kidnapping are given an
honourable goodbye. However, Ivon’s comments about the systemic murders committed by the Border Patrol are not printed in the newspaper article. The last newspaper article delineates the inescapability of the crimes within the novel. Even though Irene is safe, the true culprit is not found, and those whose involvement in the snuff film market causes the lives of hundreds of innocent girls are celebrated.

This injustice is further delved into in another intertextual device. As Ivon is an academic, she brings in her own scholarly work which, on the content level, increases the novel’s factuality. Ivon’s thesis is “Marx Meets Women’s Room: The Representation of Class and Gender in Bathroom Graffiti (Three Case Studies)”. Here she analyses the “closed discursive system of words and images—[that] can be read semiotically to analyse the social construction of class and gender identity in what Marx called the ‘community of women’” (DB 17). The intertextual reference of her dissertation simultaneously functions as a way of advancing on the action, as well as showing an academic perspective on the topic.

In Juárez, she finds one explicit graffiti on a toilet while searching for her sister, which she then uses as her third case study. It reads,

*Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.* Underneath it, somebody else had written in red nail polish and shaky lettering, *Poor Juárez, so close to Hell, so far from Jesus.* (DB 98)

The graffiti hints towards a US-involvement within Mexico, which drifts the country and its citizens further away from the idea of goodness. The good is represented through “God”, in this context. The quote is embellished by “red nail polish and shaky lettering” (ibid.) which clearly refers to the hands of a prostitute, as red nail polish is a frequent accessory of sex workers within the novel. The shaking hands while writing the quotes refer to the fact that the person’s affective state was one of terror, fear, and anxiety while writing. The city is closer to hell than it is to heaven, the terror the person writing the letters has felt, portrays the terror that haunts the entire city. With this example, Ivon finds the third case study for her thesis, namely Juárez and the “[v]iolence against women, the economic exploitation of the border, even the politics of religion” (ibid.). When walking into the bathroom again, after Irene has gone missing, the graffiti has a new layer to it.

She saw some fresh graffiti on the wall, couldn’t find the one she was looking for, and then she saw it, but it said something else now: *Poor Juárez, so far from the Truth, so close to Jesus.* (DB 186)
Now the aspect of truth is detrimental, as it refers to the construction of womanhood and women’s guilt. Authorities and economic institutions blame women for their own murders, their alleged lose morality is used as an accusation, which brings with it a clear reversal of perpetrator and victim, as well as a justification for the structural violence. The second layer to the graffiti is its intention to lead Ivon closer to the place where the films are produced, right in sight of the Jesus statue. The truth is far away, while those who die are close to Jesus, i.e. the statue. The graffiti now gives Ivon the concrete location where the murders are committed. Interestingly, the second graffiti is “written in English” (DB 188), and it might be a clue for Ivon to solve the puzzle. She “think[s] maybe someone was leaving clues on the walls of women’s toilets” (DB 211). She keeps searching for other signs within the stall, and “inside a box decorated with stars, was the statement: Aquí no hay cholas ni maqui-locas. And in tiny letters at the bottom edge of the door: El nuevo gobernador le chupa la verga a la migra” (ibid.), which translates into “‘No cholas or maqui-locas [‘maquiladora workers who become Americanized and turn into whores’ (ibid.)] here’ and ‘The new governor sucks the Border Patrol’s cock’” (ibid.). The latter refers to the corrupt system of the global South, where politicians and police officers from Mexico and the United States of America work together in order to create a common goal. Looking at the sexual notion of the reference, this possibly refers to the (illegal) pornographic industry that flourishes on the border between Juárez and the US in the novel, which is hinted at being supported by institutional and economic forces several times throughout the work. Shortly after she studies the graffiti, a person calls her with a blocked number and states “Es una fábrica cerca de Jesús” (DB 286), which means “It’s a factory close to Jesus” (ibid.), again a reference to the space where women are murdered for the pornography website.

Only when she arrives at the place the factory that the graffiti is actually a hint that would lead her towards her sister’s place of imprisonment. It further functions as a communication site for those who aware of the cruel events, who warn each other about perpetrators and dangerous locations, as their lives depend on each other’s help.

The last intertextual device is the tourist website, “Borderlines” (DB 117). As will be later discussed, this website existed on an official site. This intertextual device functions as a mediation of political perpetration within the femicides, as the tourist site of the city actively advertises with the female migrants who turn towards prostitution to find employment. It “not only provides typical tourist information on the region, but also promoted prostitution by informing the potential and obviously male tourists that” (ibid.)
[e]very week hundreds of young Mexican girls arrive in Juárez from all over Mexico. Most of these young ladies are looking for work that will be a primary source of income for their families back home. While many will begin their careers in one of the various maquiladora factories in the area, often they end up in the many bars and brothels. (DB ibid.)

By clicking the hyperlink “Those Sexy Latin Ladies” tourists are able to find “a list of some of the most popular places on La Mariscal” as well as a map and a “coupon for a free drink at the Sayonara Club” (ibid.). The name of the club can be translated to Goodbye Club, referring to the fact that men meet women in this club, who are never to be seen after their night out.

The website is adorned with “young women in bikinis and high heels” and slogans such as “Prostitution is legal here” and “You will not find a place with more beautiful, available, hot-blooded young ladies” (ibid.). Thus, the tourism department profits from the exploitation of female bodies. Here, the alleged and lauded abundance of women, commercialises the female body. Butler states that the female body is always embedded in and constructed through its surroundings. Additionally, the discrimination against the female body is covert through the essentialisation of exploitative mechanisms. Tourist sites advertise with the availability of what can be read as being easy prey, thus, exposing girls and women to the danger of sexualised violence. This is structural insofar as an official tourist website is always in close connection to the state’s image. Consequently, the state-sanctioned advertising of the female body to tourists allows an analysis in line with Mbembe’s necropolitics. The state is capable of defining those who can be killed without further retributions. As a consequence, the subgroup female, brown, and poor is not protected by the state, nor is the existence valued.

Gaspar de Alba states in her collection of academic articles on the femicides, “Making a Killing”, that in the research for the novel discussed here she “found a tourist Web site on Juárez called ‘Border Lines’ […]” (79)². The website described in the novel is the same as the one that could be found online, stating, next to “the short descriptive paragraph of the kind of ‘girls’ likely to provide that service” (ibid.) that

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² According to Gaspar de Alba, the website did exist; however, I was not able to find it anymore following the link provided in the academic paper, or through my own research.
in one of the various Maquiladora factories in the area, often they end up in the many bars and brothels. (ibid.)

The map shown on the site refers to a street that “was precisely the area where a number of victims had last been seen” (ibid.). The portrayal of the real website represents the femicides in a more realistic way, insofar as it connects the fictional representation with the real events and facilitates the implied reader’s understanding of the structural injustice committed against the women in the novel. The implied author implements the same paragraph that can (could) be found on the official website to spread awareness of the reasons behind the crimes. The violence is embedded in a much broader frame, meaning that not the individual murder case is discussed but the government’s failing—or conscious neglect—in regard to keeping certain groups safe is thematised. Ivon highlights these structural cases of injustice repeatedly especially the connection between the political and economic spheres that will be discussed in the next chapter.

The intertextual devices depict a web of discriminations that is politically and economically sanctioned and funded. They help connect the real events with the fictionalised account in Desert Blood. The intention is to affect the implied reader to such an extent that they\(^3\) are able to delve into the novel and understand the discrimination that the characters suffer, while at the same time attempting to authenticate the narrative to a certain extent.

\section*{6.2. The Pennies in Desert Blood}

In the Disclaimer, Gaspar de Alba states that she has “also added a metaphorical dimension to the story, using the image of American coins, particularly pennies, to signify the value of the victims in the corporate machine; the poor brown women who are the main target of these murders, are, in other words, as expendable as pennies in the border economy” (DB v). Even though the interpretation is already revealed in the beginning, I argue the pennies have a second layer. They create a golden thread within the novel and guide the readers to Ivon’s sister; thus, they create affect through the generic conventions of the detective novel.

I will analyse that the coins appear on the scenes of murder and hint towards the perpetrator, an American businessman. They are first thematised in the beginning, when J.W., who sits next to the main character on the plane to Mexico, drops “[a] roll of pennies” (DB 6),

\[^3\] The pronoun “they” will be used when referring to the implied reader, for the simple reason that an inclusive language is practiced.
and Ivon retrieves it for him. After he irritates her throughout the plane ride, he says goodbye, by saying “Catch ya later, alligator”, a phrase he repeats once they meet again, when Ivon is accused of possessing child pornography, saying “Told you I’d catch ya later, alligator” (DB 276). The coins hint at a gradual advancement towards the scene of crime, which is also Irene’s place of hostage. The coins guide Ivon the way insofar as they are either found on crime scenes or inside of the murdered bodies.,

The kidnappers refer to their victims as pennies, only Irene is called “nickel” (DB 222).

“Even the girl from the fair?” Irene flinched under the bed. “Her especially. Here, take the camera. I was coming to take a picture of her to put online, but you do it. Make her look cute. Legs wide open. Then go take one of her other half. I’ve got cabrones bidding on that nickel already.” (ibid.)

The scene refers to Irene’s kidnappers, who plan her rape for the snuff pornography website they are part of. Irene’s worth is comparably low, as she is only worth five cents. Her economic value is not enough compared to the risk they are taking by killing her, as she is an American citizen. Addressing the victims as coins objectifies them as an economic commodity, which furthers the ruthlessness of the perpetrators.

Even though the coins hint towards the scene, the true perpetrators are never found. After a mutilated body of a 25-year old Maquiladora worker has been uncovered, Ivon restates Max’s words “‘[i]t’s like Abe Lincoln’s been shoved down her throat’” (DB 252). This is declared by Ximena [Ivon’s friend and ex-lover], who states “‘[just] like the maquilas themselves have been shoved down Mexico’s throat…’ ‘…because of NAFTA’” (ibid.). Here a clear economic criticism can be seen. I argue that the implied author implements the critique in the scene of murder in order to use affect to strengthen the accusation of US-involvement in Mexico. This is in particular thematised in the discussion about the possible theories for the femicides. Father Francis, who supports Ivon in her search, states that “‘[t]he women are sacrificed to redeem the men for their inability to provide for their families, their social emasculation, if you will, at the hands of the American corporations’” (ibid.), to which Rubí remarks that she contests the serial killer theory to which Ivon creates her own theory, which relates to the U.S.-critical theory the novel pursues. The female migrants who are murdered, have the capability of pregnancy, which is

“a power that needs to be controlled from the minute they set foot in the maquiladora system. How many potentially pregnant bodies are employed at those
maquilas? It’s probably more cost effective to kill them off. [...] Call it a side effect of NAFTA that has to be curtailed by whatever means possible.” (DB 254)

The epidemic murders of girls and young women and the consistent mentioning of sexualised violence and forced impregnation shows that the latter theory is an economic one and is strongly hinted at throughout the novel by the implied author. Here, Taylor’s value theory shows that those young girls who are embedded in a system of economic exploitation are murdered due to their sexual transgression within a patriarchal value system, where women, who transgress the binarism of public and private, are turned into objects, into coins.

It is in this symbolic rendering that the leading perpetrator of the femicides is introduced in the very beginning; an encounter that reminds of a brief experience of sexual harassment, is much larger in the whole picture. Affectively, the scene creates a frame from the moment Ivon meets the Lone Ranger for the first time, and when she realizes who he is, namely the kidnapper of her sister. This has symbolic value insofar as it shows that even small incidents of sexualised violence or inappropriate behaviour in regard to sexual harassment, (in-)voluntarily depict the overall consensus about a topic. Thus, the pennies, of which one is patronisingly handed to Ivon as a lucky charm after the Lone Ranger has lost a bet, depict the economic devaluation of women, but also shine a light on the structural abuse directed against women by men in powerful positions.

6.3. The Symbolic Train in Desert Blood

Another symbol that functions as a hint at the kidnapped sister’s whereabouts is the motive of the train, which connects the US with the murders in Juárez again. Here, the in-between-ness is essential to create affect. The images depicted are essential for the analysis as they guide the implied reader towards the place of crime, as well as emphasise the elements that are focused on. The train symbolises the escape from the city Ivon grew up in, and the connection between the city and the place of murder. This shows that in spite of the distance created by the train metaphor, the brutal murders have a looming presence both from the outskirts of the industry quarter and, closely connected to it spatially and metaphorically, the city centre, as well as the ever-present connection to the United States of America, where the train is bound to.

Ivon remembers a poem she once wrote, “something about how the howling of a train was the sound of lovers leaving” (DB 125), while she waits “for the train to pass on Piedras Street” (ibid.). The poem is again mentioned, when Raquel, Ivon’s former secret lover, reminisces about how Ivon had presented her “a poem […], the one about the train” (ibid.). The
sad love letter is juxtaposed with the image of a train that “rumbled across the bridge, wheels screeching against the trestles” (DB 144), and “[i]t sounded like a woman screaming” (ibid.), as Ivon and Raquel head for their search for Irene. The screams directly connect the train’s route, passing the snuff film production site, with the screams of the women being executed there.

In Chapter 22 the focalisation switches to two police officers who are “on train detail” (DB 154) for “an undercover operation called Rail Raid” (ibid.), as “[t]here’d been more than a hundred robberies this year already, and thousands of dollars of cargo had gotten lifted straight off the trains and moved to Mexico” (ibid.). The train is constructed as a symbol for lawlessness, as it stands in close relation to drug-related crimes, which are reported to be on the rise. Additionally, two officers are killed on duty by smugglers, which affectively shows that the danger is imminent and disorder in the city is uncontrollable. However, the second layer of interpretation communicated here is the lack of funding in regard to eliminating sexualised violence and crime related to femicides within the city. Juxtaposed with the “multiagency operation that involved the FBI, the El Paso Police Department, Customs officials, and Border Patrol agents” (DB 154), is the “Missing Persons case: a high school girl who’d gone missing in Juárez” (ibid.), which is being investigated by the “trainee” (ibid.) Pete McCuts, after he called in a favour with his father, the commander in chief. Additionally, “[i]t wasn’t technically a case yet because all he had was a statement from the family and a suspicion of foul play, but his name was on the board next to the case number” (DB 155). Tactically, he uses the case of Irene merely to advance in his career, as it allowed him to join the train operation being conducted.

Connecting the image of the train to the kidnappings, Irene, while imprisoned in a place she does not know, dreams about the train, which

pumps across the trestles—she can see it clearly, the Southern Pacific, huffing and puffing and blowing its loud sad whistle. Then she hears something snapping, and the screech of the wheels of the train is so sharp it cuts her ears. She sees the trestle breaking and she knows the train is going to crash down on top of her. (DB 195)

The “sad whistle” of the train and Irene’s consistent dreams about the train symbolically represent the femicides in Juárez, as murdered women are frequently dumped near train lines and a serial killer dubbed “The Railway Killer” as he “found and abandoned his victims near train lines” (Herrera et al. 22). This is further emphasised by the fact that “[t]he only sign of
life” (DB 295) near the warehouse, which functions as the snuff film shooting site, is “the faraway echo of a train” (ibid.). The train passing is compared to a woman’s scream, because the only sound that the women themselves hear, apart from their abusers, is the train screeching by, not close enough to help them, but enough to cover up their screams.

Once Ivon finds the location where the murders are enacted for the snuff pornography website, she is able to hear another means of traffic, “a helicopter” (DB 296), which is hinted towards being used as a transportation device to bring the harvested organs to the United States after the girls and women had been murdered.

“One of the theories behind the crimes is that there’s a black market on human organs, and they target young women because they’re healthy, they haven’t developed bad habits yet that will have a negative impact on their organs. [...] some of the bodies were found with their insides carved out of them. And since those bodies were all found near areas in the desert that are used as landing strips, the theory goes, those healthy hearts and livers and whatever else the human organ market needs get harvested fresh from the kill and taken away immediately on helicopters.” (DB 95)

Thus, the train that stands in clear connection to the place of murder, as it passes this site in the distance functions as a clear connection to the place where the women are tortured, murdered and transported to other destinations. It drowns the women’s screams, as well as the helicopter, inevitably being acoustically associated with the suffering of those being killed.

To sum up, the train functions twofold. On the one hand, it creates an outlet of escape and separation for Ivon; it separates her from her home country, as well as creating distance from the outskirts of the city and the centre. The movement of the train parts those who love each other, namely Ivon and Raquel, but it is also an escape from the dangers in Mexico, and a connection to her home in the US. On the other hand, and much more significant for the story, the train functions as an image for the connection between the city and the murders, and the murders and the US. The train is en route to the US, passing the building in which the women are murdered. The US involvement in the murders is again highlighted. The screeching sound is compared to the screaming of women. Later in the novel the women screaming for help, screaming for their lives are drowned by the noise of the train in the distance on its way to the US. In essence, the US and Mexico are economically, structurally and culturally connected in the novel, the train is an image for this connection, where the murder of women is drowned out.
6.4. Importance of Dreams in *If I Die in Juárez*

*If I Die in Juárez* is a novel that is structured around three different, interchanging protagonists, Petra, and Mayela., who all experience different social strata. While Evita is a runaway child who is lead into the arms of prostitution, through her landlady Isidora, Mayela is a Tarahumara Indian girl, who ends up in a children’s home, and Petra is a maquiladora worker, who falls in love with the most feared gang leader and perpetrator of the murders, Augustín. Mayela’s story will not be analysed here, as it is not relevant to the topics discussed in this paper and her character is also not further developed within the story. Petra and Evita’s lives are essential for the analysis, as they are situated on two different ends of the moral spectrum, one being a prostitute while the other is a worker in a factory. Both, however, are blamed similarly for the sexualised violence committed against their bodies.

Including three different girls within the novel and interchanging the perspectives from chapter to chapter allows a picture of three different lives within a city that is haunted by murder and violence. Each of the girls struggles with sexualised violence and the femicides that are omnipresent. Their different backgrounds are connected in their struggle to keep alive in a city that threatens their existences.

It is through dreams and affective perceptions that the female characters are allowed to show their (inner) world. Additionally, they function as a plot device, insofar as it is in these moments that affect is strongest and the inner emotions and feelings of the characters are externalised and made visible. This almost always implies a movement of plot in the text.

Through the character’s bodily affects, the implied reader understands her inner thoughts and feelings. For example, Petra’s body feels something horrible looming in the city of Juárez before they leave for their new home; she experiences a clairvoyant sensation, which serves to build tension, affect the implied reader, and foreshadow imminent danger.

She didn’t tell anyone, but a sudden, overwhelming fear seized her. It began in the pit of her stomach and spun out of control, making her heart beat wildly. Something was there in the gray dawn with the siren sounding in the distance and the sun rising through a cloud of dust. Something was there—waiting for her. (IIDJ 66)

Interestingly, the affective level that is projected onto the reader, is first experienced by the character herself. Through the character’s body, the implied reader is able to bear witness and understand the character’s fears and suffering. Here, the emotional interconnection of body
and mind can be seen, as her mind projects the feeling onto her body and vice versa. As Ahern states, there are affects that lie between the intuition and cognition (cf. 9), namely the affect is evoked through an outside source, the horn, but the actual fear behind it is the fear of the unknown, the premonition of a dangerous event in the future. Massumi states that threat is an affect that possesses a different kind of logic, it functions in the liminal space between the possible action of one or the other (cf. 55). The affect is shown in and on her body. The uncontrollable energy starts in her stomach and continues to her heart. Petra’s body senses danger in the unknown.

This threat is additionally portrayed through dreams. Ester’s dreams revolve around men chasing her and Petra’s missing body, similar to the other maquiladora workers, whose bodies have never been found. Petra herself dreams about the moon being personalised through a rabbit, who “jumped from the moon all the way to earth. Petra watched helplessly as it landed on her body” (IIDJ 154). She feels an imminent threat beyond the imaginable, which is externalised onto her body. This terror is formulated through her “sweating and [being] frightened, her heart beating hard” (IIDJ 155). The pressure of the “things she couldn’t control that seemed to weigh her down” (IIDJ 213); the burdens that come with the expectations from her mother to grow up, as her mother says, “we both need to work to get us through all this” (IIDJ 105), meaning that Petra, who is still a child, has to give up her education. These fears “are projected onto the dream of the rabbit, who “crush[es] her under its weight” (ibid.). The emotional overload shows that the weight of the world seems to crush her, and she feels the pain of this on her own body. This way, the implied reader is able to comprehend the crushing weight the girl carries. This functions as a device to affect the implied reader, who is faced by the emotions of the characters and drawn into the storyline.

The importance of dreams depicts the complicated inner lives of the girls characterised in the novel and help the implied reader comprehend their suffering and the pressure they constantly experience from being surrounded by violence and imminent danger. Their clairvoyant attributes move the storyline on, they foreshadow tragic events, and creates affect insofar as the tension of the dangerous and unknown is hinted at through the dreams.

6.5. The Untitled Song in If I Die in Juárez

Already, it is noticeable that the themes of death and suffering are recurring in If I Die in Juárez. Already the title of the novel refers to the sentence uttered by Petra’s father before they leave their hometown to emigrate to Juárez, “promise me, if I die in Juárez, you’ll bury me in Montenegro” (IIDJ 89), their hometown. The frame closes once her father dies peacefully and
is buried in Montenegro. “‘In peace,’ she added, smiling. ‘We buried him in peace. He lived long enough to know you had been found’” (IIDJ 321). However, it is not only the topic of death that the father’s illness brings with it, it is also the emigration into a city filled with debauchery and danger. The implied author focuses predominantly on the differentiation between good and bad by overgeneralising and simplifying these two allegedly binary opposite terms. In order to survive, Petra recites a song over and over again, which reminds her of her origins, and is translated from the “language of the Tarahumaras” (IIDJ 325). The book includes both this and the English version. This intertextual device facilitates the humanisation of the character, who recites the song/poem in dire times. Petra’s grandmother had taught her to “sing to the four directions, north, south, east, and west, giving each direction its due” (IIDJ 57), a song, her grandmother “had learned from her Tarahumara grandmother” (ibid.). It is, thus, a song filled with energy and hope, greeting each morning, the sun itself, and thanking the “Father, Creator” for their existence. The poem is a reminder for Petra to keep strong and keep fighting for what she knows to be good, especially during her brutal rape by the cartel boss Augustín.

The poem consists of four stanzas with varying lines. It salutes the “father sun” and his caring function for humankind, as well as the possibility of each day to be embraced. It is “old, primitive” (IIDJ 56), but its function is not the poetic content, but the connection Petra draws to her family and her origins, as well as to her home country, through the song. It is exactly this memory that helps Petra survive the sexualised violence committed against her. As she is left in the desert, left to die, after being raped multiple times, she dreams of death, seeing the sun rising.

With her one good eye, Petra saw the morning light approaching […]. Abuela Teodora put her hand tenderly on Petra’s shoulder, and they walked together to the mountains of Montenegro. The crouching figures were ablaze with the rising sun, and they sang the ancient song. (IIDJ 318)

She finds the save haven of her home country and her family by hearing the words of the songs her grandmother used to sing with her each morning. It is in this moment that she is saved and manages to survive the torture. I argue that the song is an intertextual device that is used in order to affect the implied reader. Even though the poem is not poetically stylised, its connection to Petra is emotionally charged. Despite the tragic events, Petra emancipates herself by remembering her family and the ones she realizes it is worth staying alive for.
The poem is once again mentioned in “Epilogue: Mujeres Unidas de Juárez”, where the focaliser is the “reporter from El Diario” (IIDJ 310) Rita Canchola, who covered Petra’s kidnapping. She was before threatened to be killed by one of the gang members if she exposed the details, she had uncovered about the brutal violence committed against women in Juárez. From then on, she has made it her aim to “stand together” in order to “become stronger” (IIDJ 323) and spread awareness about the femicides in media. The last chapter calls for action and contextualises the femicides from a present perspective, referring to the activist group “Mujeres Unidas de Juárez”, founded by Petra de la Rosa. Affectively, the last chapter depicts resistance and the hope for a future that is created by survivors and relatives of victims of the femicides. Here, the central role is played by the song, which, now, is not translated into English, but left in the original “language of the Tarahumaras” (IIDJ 325), and functions as a slogan and anthem for the group. It symbolically stands for the “[j]oy” that “would yet come to chase the darkness away” (ibid.); Petra herself is described as “an angel”, who has “light around her” (IIDJ 326f.), and radiated from the distance. The song “‘saved [her] life,’” and now it is her who has established “two shelters in Juárez and [has] plans to extend to three more cities this year” (IIDJ 327). Her survival is depicted in glorified terms, and the affect of hope and happiness is, thus, created. This is further strengthened by the group’s ability to change the structural level of the crimes, as they were able to invite “representatives from everywhere, including the Governors of Chihuahua, Texas, New Mexico, California, and Arizona” (IIDJ 328). Thus, the defence against the femicides comes from a group of coloured women, who, themselves have suffered from the effects of the murders, and empower themselves by creating their own agency. During the meeting, a picture is taken of all the women and men in the group, which symbolises the togetherness and unity of those wishing and working for change. Here, the song stands as an idea of perseverance and strength, guiding their fight against structural forces, such as the police, who, for example, silence Rita.

At times, she had been days ahead of the police, often discovering clear evidence as to who had committed the crimes and having to put up with botched police investigations, sealed with silence […]. Her testimony could be discounted by the police. (IIDJ 325)

This directly refers to the fact that even though “Augustín [was] […] the one to suffer an assassination in France, and the hideous young man, el Cucuy, [was] killed in prison a few years later”, as well as Hilo [one of Augustín’s helpers] had disappeared, the crimes still continued, thus, showing that, despite the deaths of those guilty of them within the novel, the
reason for the crimes is a cultural one. The Epilogue mentions the fact that the activists are already teaching their daughters about resistance and bringing them up to “[f]ac[e] a firing squad if she has to and not run[…], and best of all, liv[e] to tell about it” (IIDJ 324). This refers to the song’s strength, as Petra herself attributes her life to it, stating that “without Abuela Teodora and her gift of song the whole story would have been forgotten as yet another brutal murder of a young woman in Juárez” (IIDJ 324).

In consequence, the relationship between women of different generations, strata, ethnicities and ages allows the group to prosper and to work together to accomplish their aim. Thus, the poem functions as a song of encouragement, it creates affect insofar as it allows the implied reader to understand the hopelessness Petra has experienced but has overcome through the positivity that the song has affectively communicated with her through her own memories connected with it.

7. Depiction of Sexualised Violence

7.1. Representation of Perpetrators in If Die in Juárez

The main topic that is discussed within this text, and will be analysed in this chapter, is the perpetrator status of men in a society that condones misogynistic behaviour. Machismo culture is delved into through the topic of the femicides, and the implied author attempts to demonstrate that sexual violence runs like a thread through the lives of each stratum, endangering both working girls, as well as morally accepted families.

After Evita has fled from her mother’s home for the first time, she roams the city at night, only to be met by policemen, who sexually abuse her. They are sent by her mother and claim that “they were doing her mother a favour” (IIDJ 24). The language used by the officers is crude and disrespectful. “So, you want to be a whore and run on the streets, do you? Well, see if you like this!” (ibid.) The act of violence committed against Evita is described in detail through the focalisation of both Evita and the policemen. Through the narration Evita’s innocence is depicted, the implied reader understands that Evita had never experienced anything sexual before.

The policeman unzipped his pants and exposed himself to her. Then he took her face and forced it over his crotch. Evita, struggling and crying felt sticky wet fluid all over her face. She had never seen a man’s private parts before. (IIDJ 24f.)
Only with the command of the other officer, does the violent officer stop his actions, as both realize that the girl is indeed a virgin. Evita is brought to her mother with the threat, “[i]f you say anything about what happened to you, you’ll live only long enough to regret it. What he did to you is nothing compared to what I’ll do to you” (IIDJ 25). The perpetrator, i.e. the police, is continuously depicted as “the worst” (IIDJ 23), they are referred to as having “the power to beat people, imprison them, make false charges, even kill them” (IIDJ 27). This reiterates the power structures embedded in the system, and, thus reiterates the helplessness of the characters. The involvement of police officers in the brutal deaths of young women, exposes the inescapability of the structural violence women suffer from.

Shortly before Evita runs away a second time, her pregnant sister, Lety, is beaten by her husband, Julio, causing a miscarriage. Evita “figured her sister let it happen because her leg was deformed and she couldn’t expect anything better from men” (IIDJ 29). The blame is directed towards Lety, whose incapability of escaping is constructed as acceptance of the situation. The paradox in this episode of victim-blaming is that even Evita, who finds the responsibility for the crime on her sister’s side, advises her not to call the police, as “‘[t]hey don’t defend women. In fact, they do all they can to abuse us’” (ibid.). The terror instilled in Evita, however, does nothing to overcome the culturally and socially instilled gender roles that depict women as the ones who are guilty for their own abuse.

It is not only police officers whose violent behaviour endangers the female characters. Ricardo, Evita’s mother’s ex-boyfriend, sexually abuses Evita, by luring her into a motel room. By exploiting her fears and using his power over her, he binds her to him, as she “didn’t want him mad at her, but she was afraid of him, of his big hands on her face, and the way he held her hand in his, and how it disappeared into his hot sweaty palm” (IIDJ 78). He exploits her trust, and pressures her into joining him for the night. The presence of his knife creates tension and fear, it foreshadows the violent acts to come. He calls her endearing names, which depicts his paedophilic and predatory behaviour towards Evita. He refers to her as a “tiny child that he wanted to cradle” (IIDJ 80). He “convinced” (ibid.) her to give in, and with tears in her eyes, and the thought of her mother, and her resolution “to be better than her mother and mean more to Ricardo than her mother ever had” (ibid.), he makes “her insides burn with pain” (ibid.). Her blood covers the sheets and she prays to wake from this nightmare. In the hope of feeling something, Evita pushes the knife Ricardo carries with him, into her wrist, while he is asleep. By trying to hurt him, she attacks her own body, directing violence against her female body, as this is the only way she knows how to be resist. However, he saves her, worrying about the fact
that the woman at the motel desk “would be able to identify him as the man who had been with [Evita]” (ibid.). After stilling the blood flow, he leaves to buy cigarettes, but does not return.

The incident, again, is blamed on Evita, as, according to Isidora, the woman who gives shelter to Evita and pressures her into prostitution, “[a] man takes and takes and takes from a woman, and when he’s done he goes to another woman and starts all over again. Love doesn’t exist, only need” (IIDJ 82). After Evita confesses that he had not given her any money for the sexual encounter, Isidora informs Evita that she had been used and she “must never, never give [her] body to a man without payment” (ibid.). Evita does not encounter a positive environment where her pain is soothed, but she is introduced to a new form of life, where her body is capital and “[i]f a man wants to bruise [her] with kisses—that’s another charge” (ibid.).

The second scene of abuse is even more brutal, as the rules Evita creates for her own body are not respected. “Ricardo only laughed at” the preservative that Evita pressures him to use, and she “was helpless to stop him” as he “thrust himself into her” (IIDJ 85). Each of the following sexual encounter revolves around him, except for the last one, where Ricardo “taught her about the places in her body that caused her deep pleasure and how to use them to lose herself in their lovemaking” (ibid.). However, it is exactly this experience that shows Ricardo that Evita has now finally reached her adulthood; it is, for him, her first sexual experience, which marks, effectively her transcending into womanhood. Later, Ricardo even reminisces about the fact that “[s]he was a child still, and he had made her a woman” (IIDJ 239). Thus, it is in this moment that Ricardo ends his relationship with her, returning to his pregnant wife, without paying for the services.

The inner affects that she experiences throughout the sexualised violence and the loss of Ricardo are externalised onto her body through the image of “spikes that drilled in her from the inside showed up on her body again, huge red blotches of pain, and disappeared only when she thought about hurting herself” (ibid.). It is this bodily affect that clearly shows the reader Evita’s inside. Symbolically, the affect that controls and hurts her body can be understood as the existing and complicated connection between body and mind. Only the thought of self-harm cures the psychosomatic rash she develops. The sexualised violence that is committed on her 13–year-old body causes her to develop a trauma that she projects onto her body. She copes with the life as a child prostitute by externalising the pain she experiences on the inside.

Not only Evita suffers from the sexual abuse at the hands of men. The structural violence committed against women in the novel is symbolically depicted through the generalisation of perpetration. Cristal, Evita’s roommate and fellow sex worker, informs about the sexualised crimes that have been committed on her body.
The ones who refused to wear a condom and ended up telling the woman they were infected with AIDS, when they knew it was too late for her to do anything about it. She didn’t tell [Evita] the story of a friend who was murdered by a man who turned on her and slit her from her vagina up to her throat.

“It’s dangerous—very dangerous, too.” […]

“I’m afraid of the police,” Evita told her. “They threatened me once when my mother sent them out to look for me.”

“Oh, they’ll do more than threaten you. You must never assume anything from them. They are more dangerous than all the men you will ever meet.” (IIDJ 131)

Here, the sexualised violence committed against the body of a sex worker shows that “sex empowers the body; sex is agency, the enactment of desire” (Gaspar de Alba 83). In a patriarchal society the only ones allowed sexual agency are men, while “women’s sexuality has to be scrutinized, proscribed, protected, or punished” (ibid.), those women who transcend the moral values of a certain society are “punished with torture, rape, and ritual destruction of the female body” (Caputi; in: ibid.) Violence committed by men against women is even supported and facilitated by the police force in the novel.

In order to represent the murders in Juárez, I argue, the implied author has chosen to generalise in regard to the perpetrators, depicting (nearly) all men as (potential) perpetrators or being complicit in the femicides. This creates the notion that the femicides occur due to socialisation that raises boys and girls in a system that pervades machismo. Within the novel, structurally and culturally, all men are perpetrators. According to Cristal, the murderers “want to inflict the most pain they can, so they choose women who are innocent and certain to have families who will mourn them. And of course, the police accuse the women of being prostitutes and leading a double life—as you now, they always blame the woman” (IIDJ 132). The murderers are, thus, represented as revelling in their brutality, enjoying the suffering they cause. In contrast to Desert Blood, the murders are not economically motivated, but by the revenge upon the emancipated female body in a patriarchal society. The next chapter will take up these points and discuss the motives behind the femicides and how an entire gender is constructed as violent.
7.2. The Motives in If I Die in Juárez

To understand why each male character is depicted as brutal and misogynistic, it is essential to mention the two motives given for the murder of women in If I Die in Juárez. The first being that while Augustín tortures Petra in his villa, “he had her where he wanted her—totally surrendered, something he would never have from his wife” (IIDJ 313). This shows that Machismo culture and toxic masculinity, as it is frequently referred to in Western Feminist Studies’ discourses, is portrayed as the source of the structural violence committed against women. Augustín projects his dissatisfaction with his working wife on the most vulnerable group, i.e. the poor female body. I argue that by torturing and murdering young women, the character gains the masculinity that he was deprived of socially through his independent wife. Thus, he abuses Petra in a place in which Evita experienced sexual abuse before by the members of Los Rebeldes. This space metaphor functions on two different levels. First, the villa depicts the economic and structural power of the male guests and hosts. Second, the lawlessness, sexual deviancy, and is accepted in this liminal space, in which those who are in charge of the law become the perpetrators.

During the sexual torture, Augustín dresses Evita in the white dress worn by each of his helpless victims—as well as a young child at a private strip club, described in Chapter 8.2. He then sexually abuses Petra. The dress in this context functions as a symbol for youth and innocence. “Every time [Augustín] see[s] [the dress], [he] think[s] of virgins, waiting for their first man to climb into bed with them—hot, hot women, wanting to do it over and over again” (IIDJ 294). Here, a virgin cult is practiced and reproduced, which can be identified within the novel throughout various (non-)consensual sexual scene. The paedophilic tendencies of the male characters within the novel show, again, that they are, in general, constructed as predators. This is emphasised by the “look of pure evil” that accompanies his pleasure for paedophilic non-consensual sexual activities. Additionally, the act of sexually violating a girl allows Augustín to revel in his re-instated masculinity, which he constructs through violence and brutality.

The focalisation switches between Augustín and Petra, creating an innuendo of fear and sexual pleasure. While Petra is plagued by her “knees weaken[ing]” (IIDJ 295), and her body

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4 There is one clear exception to this, namely the American soldier, Harry, who is stylised, in part, as the white saviour from the North. He both saves Petra from the clutches of Augustín and later stands by her as she founds her organisation. However, an analysis of this would burst the constraints of my thesis; thus, I have to leave this part—hopefully—for further research to come. However, one could also state that each Mexican male character is constructed as evil.
crumbling from fear, Augustín’s body language is one of strength, vigour, and sexual prowess. Here, a clear distinction between female and male can be drawn in the tradition of Hausen. The perpetrator is evil through and through and defines himself as “a conqueror” (ibid.), in whose hands Petra cannot do anything “but submit, again and again and again” (ibid.). He “shook strands of her hair off his hand, as if it meant nothing to him” (ibid.). The omniscient narrator solely focuses on Augustín’s strength and Petra’s weakness, creating a dichotomy of the evil male and the weak female. Additionally, the aggressive nature of the scene is simultaneously sexually charged.

He forced Petra to drink the wine, which was sweet, with a bitter taste that clung to her tongue. He said he’d sweeten it up with a strawberry and forced one into her mouth, making her gag as he forced it down her throat. Before she was finished trying to chew it, tears streaming down her face, he forced another one in her mouth and more wine. Dark liquid ran down the sides of her mouth, and she reached for something to wipe it. He only laughed uncontrollably and grabbed a napkin, roughly cleaning her mouth with it and slapping her in the face, “to teach you how to eat with manners.” (IIDJ 296)

He focalises the scene of rape, as it is depicted through his eyes, which further dehumanises Petra and sexually charges the violence. The implied reader experiences the perpetrator’s thoughts and feelings. Petra is objectified and victimised, because she is in a drugged state, and, thus, cannot document the violence herself. She is stripped off her humanity. The focaliser’s lack of empathy and humanity allows the implied reader to experience the violence from the point of view of the perpetrator, enabling a voyeuristic glance at a scene of brutal violence.

Then his voice turned shrill a hideous howl, as he shrieked in her face that she wasn’t worthy to wear the Miramontes dress, and he should have known better than to waste his time putting it on her. “A whore like her would know nothing about such elegance,” he said. He called the woman back in and told her to undress Petra, as he didn’t want to tear the dress off of her and end up spoiling it. Once the dress was removed and Petra lay naked on the floor, he said “Now, I’ll prove myself to you.” He stood over her, enraged, breathing wildly, his eyes narrowed to menacing slits. Then he pounced on her, a vicious animal unleashing itself on its prey. (IIDJ 297)
The narration allows a glimpse into the thoughts of Augustín, whose utter lack of respect for Petra is communicated to the implied reader through his point of view. The naked body lying on the floor, and Augustín’s purpose to “prove [himself] to [her]” (ibid.), evoke the image of a rejected lover, glancing spitefully at the body lying underneath him. This sexually charged scene is narrated with a helpless undertone and evokes the image of a predator charging its prey. The comparison to a wild beast represents Augustín’s lack of control over his own body. He does not regain what he deems to be his lost masculinity, which can be seen in the verb “shrieked”, a verb that is typically not connoted with masculinity and traits like power and control. In this scene of utter violent transgression, he is still not able to find the strength he craves for. He fusses over a dress to project his own ideals of womanhood on his victim. This allows him to construct the women he tortures the way he sees fit. He is an animal out of control, his desperation is palpable as he imitates the stance of an animal, trying to recover from the emasculation he has received because of his working wife.

It is not only the male gaze that narrates the brutality of the events that sexualises, even eroticizes the scene of violence, but there are additionally cameras which “scanned the room, making it impossible for Petra to hide” (IIDJ 306) from the gaze of those watching, namely men. It is constantly men who “stare[…] at Petra lying on the bed naked” (ibid.), their gaze describes the events “lustfully” (ibid.), but they, here Hilo, “couldn’t touch her until Augustín gave him permission” (ibid.), as it was a “a place hidden in [Augustín’s] own house where he took pleasure in making women submit to him over and over again” (ibid.).

He violated them as often as he like, cursed them, relived himself on them, and forced electrical wired deep into their bodies, sending electrical currents to destroy their wombs, where he said were conceived the most despicable forms of life, clots of blood that must be destroyed. (IIDJ 307)

This section particularly emphasises the hatred that is felt against the victim’s assumed capability of bearing children. Children originating from sex work are devalued and seen as culturally and socially inferior. The wombs of poor brown women, who are constructed as immoral sex workers, thus, need to be destroyed. It is in a much broader sense the cleansing of an entire social class that is deemed improper. Wright refers to the concept of “public cleansing” (713) in the brutal murdering of those who are able to bear further undesirable lives. The murders and sexualised violence against the bodies of women are justified because their appearance in public is not condoned by those who reign the city. Their lives are constructed
as insignificant, and their power to give life to other “unclean women” (Caputi 288) is a danger those face, who support a discriminatory political system.

Thus, we come to the second justification for the murders stated. The conscious obliteration of women in the name of cultural values and gender roles. The sexualised violence depicted is committed against dark, poor women, who work to fund their own lives and the lives of their families. Thus, the murderers aim is to destroy a certain group of women, constructed as “despicable forms of life” (IIDJ 307), as they seem to destroy a cultural system highly valued by the male characters in the novel. As the killings are committed on a structural level, a certain group of men, due to their social and cultural beliefs and standing attempt to exterminate a social stratum. The women who are found are described as “being destroyed beyond recognition” (IIDJ 255), and “[s]o many women had disappeared, that when a body was found, many families went to view it thinking it might be their daughter, their sister, who had never come home” (ibid.). After Evita had been sexually assaulted “at the private party” (IIDJ 227) she inspects her body for the damage done. “There were purple bruises all over her body and teeth marks on her breasts, neck, and thighs […] [.] [h]er lips were bloody, and one side of her face ached as if someone had punched her hard” (ibid.). The violence she experiences clearly focuses on sexualised or gendered body parts, which the perpetrators tried to destroy, in order to destroy her, a poor, brown female sex worker. Cristal wears the results of sexualised violence on her body, as she has “a long scar going from [her] left underarm down to her ribcage” (IIDJ 130), which is hinted at having been created by one of her customers. As already mentioned, she further articulates the client’s refusal to wear preservatives, informing her too late of their existing HIV infection, and a friend’s killing, who was murdered “by a man who turned on her and slit her from her vagina up to her throat” (IIDJ 131). Her explanation is that “‘[t]hey want to inflict the most pain they can, so they choose women who are innocent and certain to have families who will mourn them’” (ibid.). The victims who are reported about are brutally murdered, one being “raped numerous times, and investigators said her wrists had been handcuffed”, she “was found bruised and beaten with one breast missing, lying in a pile of trash in an empty lot” (IIDJ 136). Another girl’s “head was wrapped in a black plastic bag, and she had been tortured and raped like the others. They said her tongue was bitten off—and her left breast was cut off” (IIDJ 185). The women are discarded and dehumanised in the process. The perpetrators symbolically warn the entire society by cleansing the supposed immorality from the streets of Juárez. Women are constructed as disposable through the act of violence and murder, especially those women whose lives are led in the public, as they transcend the private sphere.
In the novel, there is a clear discourse of men accusing women who work, either in prostitution or in factories, of destroying traditional gender roles. As one male character states, “[y]ou know el machismo rules their lives. Here, it becomes clear that both reasons for the femicides in *If I Die in Juárez* are closely intertwined. Men feel worthless because their wives support the family, consequently, they project their anger onto women. They use violence to regain their own felt masculinity, “beating [women] up and making their lives miserable” (IIDJ 143), continuing to blame the women, as they start to “get big heads and think they can wear the pants in the family” (ibid.). Thus, the rationale behind the murders is the re-establishment of a conservative and historically constructed social order, within the novel, and in the process cleansing the city of its lower social stratum and immigration.

Antonio, Petra’s fiancé, who is characterised as empathetic and supportive in the beginning, states that he is “unsure how to deal with Petra as a woman who was now working and making a life in Juárez for herself apart from him, a woman feeling for the first time her own independence” (IIDJ 205). He then continues to blame the murders on the victims, as he points at Cristal—not knowing that Petra herself is acquainted with her—who dresses inappropriately according to his standards, “‘No wonder there are murders in Juárez! Look at the way these women dress. I hope I never catch you dressing like that’” (IIDJ 207). The ideological and cultural (re-)enforcement of these ideas, allows them to prosper and be (re-)constructed, and, consequently, it enables the perpetuation of a discriminatory system. As even those, who are constructed as loving characters inadvertently support the violence, the situation is further constructed as inescapable. Of course, the active participation of institutional forces in violating girls and women and consequential cover-ups are a deeply ingrained problem. Without a doubt, the police supports a discriminatory system by accepting, supporting, and following laws that, in this case distinguish between the lives that are worth living and those that are disposable. The outsiders, namely immigrated women, such as Evita, are even more in danger of facing sexualised violence, as the intersectionality between their migratory, economic, and social status, as well as their gender makes them vulnerable to kidnappings.

To sum up, the murders against women and girls are committed solely for the purpose of enjoyment and eradication of a whole gender, resulting from the belief that women transcend gender roles that are firmly set in the Mexican society. Especially women who penetrate the borders between public and private are constructed as immoral and blamed for the disintegration of the roles that are historically and culturally grounded in the society of the novel. The very foundation of the male gender’s constructed dominance, signified through
Augustín, is shaken, justifying the brutal reasons behind the murders for the perpetrators themselves.

### 7.3. Tension and Sexualised Violence in *Desert Blood*

In *Desert Blood*, the violence committed against women is also depicted on the personal level. In order to make the reader aware of the imminent and constantly looming danger of the murders and the violence. Switching the focalisation and showing the lived reality of sexualised violence through the eyes of a 14-year-old girl, who is sold into prostitution by her female floor supervisor, enables a coherent understanding of who the victims are, and whose lives are being destroyed for the entertainment of snuff consumers. Thus, Chapter 21 will be analysed here to show that that the main character in this chapter functions as a depiction of the planned coherence in the kidnapping and murdering, showing again the inescapability of the murders.

Chapter 21 introduces the previously unknown Mireya. She meets Lone Ranger in a club, where he tries to sell her makeup and make her a star in one of his movies. The entire chapter is written in present tense, thus, distinguishing itself from the other chapters. The present tense is used to evoke immediacy and create the affect of looming danger; the perpetrator is searching for new victims. The implied reader is present in the scene and experiences the tension through the focaliser. However, as the implied reader is aware of the brutal crimes, the violence that is to come resonates throughout the entire chapter. By using Lone Ranger’s focalisation, a voyeuristic gaze is cast on his tactics that allow a glimpse into the manipulative world of the perpetrator.

Ariel, Mireya’s floor supervisor introduces her to the Lone Ranger. She had already opened up to her the possibility of sex work, promising it to be a lucrative side job, by convincing her “‘[s]ome of them don’t want to have sex with you […] [.] They’re married men, but they’re lonely, they’re on a business trip and they just want your company” (DB 148). After Mireya dodges his advances, he gets “displeased” (ibid.) but he offers her a role in one of his films. She thinks that her mother was an actress as well, as she “would make extra money by meeting strange men outside of the cine” (DB 150) only to be beaten to death by her partner, after he had found out. Here, a vicious circle is observable insofar as the daughter’s unawareness of her mother’s prostitution does not protect her from harm but ensnares her in the same cycle of violence from which her mother was not able to escape. This serves as an example that escaping a low social background is difficult, if not impossible for women.

The sexual advances of Lone Ranger increase but “she’s not prepared for that” (ibid.). The dramatic irony in this instance is that the implied reader’s knowledge affects them insofar
as the girl’s naivety leads her directly into danger, and, consequently, death. The girl’s murder is never described, but the gaps in the storyline are an affective technique that creates tension by allowing the implied reader to imagine the horrible end of the innocent girl.

After Mireya’s detailed description of Lone Ranger’s beauty and his charming attitude, she is startled by the “old white boat of a car with a crack in the windshield” (DB 153) which has “a box of plastic trash bags and a coil of rope on the backseat” (ibid.). The connotation of the utensils on the backseat create the affect of fear, as the unsaid foreshadows the events of the night, the implied reader, due to prior knowledge, is already able to decipher that the character is in danger. When Mireya notices the “handcuffs” (ibid.) “hanging off the rearview mirror” (ibid.), it is too late and “[s]he feels her stomach jump” (ibid.). Her fear is depicted on her body, her inner muscles contract, because her mind and body both react violently to the intensities of the moment. “The door closes on her side. She reaches for the door handle, but all she finds is a screw. No window crank, either” (ibid.). She is imprisoned, and there is no way of escaping; “her head starts to pound and her limbs feel suddenly very sluggish […] her throat has closed and no sound comes out” (ibid.). The present tense creates urgency and immediacy as the events are unfolding. He “punches her in the face” (ibid.) when she shouts for help. The chapter finishes abruptly with the sentence “[i]t is not time to scream yet” (ibid.) and the cruelty that follows is not depicted, but the open end allows the implied reader to imagine the horrors. The unsaid leaves more to imagine than the depiction of violence ever could.

In this scene, it is deducible that companies and the perpetrators work very close together. Especially female complicity is thematised with the co-worker Ariel, who introduces young female migrant workers who have no social net in Juárez, to Lone Ranger, who abuses their bodies for his films. In turn Ariel gains power and monetary compensation. Ariel, who is the superior of other maquiladora workers, uses her economic status to deceive young girls and women, sending them to their deaths. It is later revealed that she is also actively contributing in the murders, washing and stripping the women before they are tortured on film.

The Lone Ranger is a figure that personifies the ruthlessness of powerful men in the novel. His power gives him the possibility of lawlessness, he is supported by an entire system, by the political and economic structure, which he, in part, is in charge of. His ploys always turn out successful, as he has other men who support him, policemen, boarder control, (security) guards, who pave the way for the kidnapping. However, it has to be stated here that, in a sense, the Lone Ranger is not likely the person who pulls the strings, as he himself is in charge of kidnapping new victims, a risky—albeit easy in the semi-lawless zone of the city—endeavour that would most likely be executed by a trusted handyperson. Thus, even though the perpetrators
are visible, it can be seen that the crimes are much more intricately embedded in the society and political system than they might appear at first glance. This will be further delved into in the subsequent chapter.

7.4. Depiction of Violence in *Desert Blood*

It is in chapter 38, that Ivon finally realises who the Lone Ranger is and which businesses he is leading, namely a (child) pornography site that specialises in snuff pornography; here, a clear connection between structural power and sexualised violence is substantiated. In the following section a pivotal point in the storyline will be analysed in order to serve as an example of how the novel depicts sexualised violence. Using the example of Chapter 38, this section will illustrate in which ways the depiction of violence is constructed in the book.

As briefly stated in previous chapters, Ivon is taken into custody by “Capt. J. Wilcox, Chief Detention Enforcement Officer” (DB 276), who was her seat neighbour on the plane ride to El Paso, “the annoying guy with the cowboy hat and the Patek Phillippe on the airplane” (ibid.). He incriminates her unjustly by planting false evidence of a snuff pornography film, which is on a video of a medical examination that Ivon had taken part in. It was filmed by Rubí and dubbed by her husband, Walter. It is later revealed that he was allegedly part of the Lone Ranger business and attempted to resell video material independently for extra sources of income.

The affect created in this scene is of utter helplessness, as even though Ivon knows her rights and repeatedly refers to the illegality of the arrest, she is not listened to. She is powerless in relation to the border agent. The imminent danger is visible on her body, she feels “her pulse quickening […], she wanted to yell out to someone, run away from him, but she’d lost her voice all of a sudden and her limbs felt like wax” (DB 277). The terror of the situation is projected onto her body, as she realises that her safety is endangered.

The verbal degradation Ivon suffers during the arrest refers to her sexuality, as he calls her “Ms. Butch” (ibid.) and tries to frame her with a “Class A Medical Exclusion Certificate” (ibid.), which refers to the 1990 law “that gays and lesbians are a threat to national security” (DB 278). He reduces her to her body and sexuality that he constructs as different, as the Other.

The inescapability of the situation evokes the affect of hopelessness and terror, the injustice is graspable, but Ivon cannot defend herself against the structural power. By now, the riddle is almost solved, it hints towards a perpetration of the law enforcement, and is again further emphasised through the many threats against Ivon that directly insult her womanhood and sexuality.
However, Ivon is fully sure of J. Wilcox’s perpetration, as he shows her the tape that jumps to a different film after the innocent examination ends. It is narrated by an English voice that praises child prostitution in Juárez and narrates the same text that can be found on the official Juárez tourist website, discussed in chapter 6.

The focaliser in this scene is Ivon and the implied reader experiences the film material through her eyes. The negative affects of disgust and horror are clearly conveyed, as she watches the paedophilic snuff video. In contrast to If I Die in Juárez, the scene is not sexualised, but depicted for what it truly is, gruesome. The girl is “no more than ten years old” (DB 280) and depicted in “long braids and a school uniform” (ibid.) in order to symbolically depict her young age further. The verbs and adjectives used to describe the sexualised violence and rape depict the active struggle of the child. She is “pulling back, refusing, resisting, crying” (ibid.) which is juxtaposed with the cinematographic depiction of a clear image of the rapist’s “huge erect penis” (ibid.) in the centre of the frame.

J.W. forces Ivon to translate the line “Peeled shrimp you asked for, peeled shrimp you get” (DB ibid.), which is a line from a song that is included in the film. Here, the sexualised violence is rendered comically, referring to a circumcised phallic object, to, subsequently, ridicule the girl’s fight, as J.W., patronisingly debases the song as “[c]atchy” (ibid.). The narration does not use rape as a plot device but delineates the terror of the events depicted to visualise the daily violence in the society of Desert Blood. Furthermore, it affects the reader insofar as they become aware of the cruelty occurring in the city of Juárez, where events such as this graphically illustrated one, are part of the daily lives of many girls and women.

Now the question needs to be asked as to how this is conveyed. In contrast to If I Die in Juárez, the victim is not by any means sexualised. The fact that she is a child is repeatedly emphasised. The focaliser notices the “eyes puffed up with fear, tears gushing down her cheeks, she was still refusing to do what the man wanted” (DB 281) and depicts the terror the child experiences. Verbs such as “forced” (ibid.) juxtapose the description to the sexualised accounts in If I Die in Juárez. Ivon is clearly terrorised by the images, her “vision blurred, […] she clamp[s] her eyes shut to keep from seeing the girl’s dead face, tongue squeezed between her teeth, head lolling to the side” (ibid.). Ivon registers that the paedophilic content she has just watched is “snuff” (ibid.), meaning that after the sexualised violence the murder is clearly depicted as well. The film continues to show the heavily mutilated body of the child in the desert, which is described in detail and shows the true horrors of the murders. The end credits show “Lone Ranger Productions…★.” The implied reader experiences the looming danger; however, it is when J.W. stands up and Ivon “noticed the bulge in his pants” (ibid.), that tension
is created insofar as the gruesome events contrasted with his sexual reaction foreshadow that Ivon is now his next victim.

There is one more layer that needs to be discussed in order to show the full extent of the detailed language used to create affect. Additional to the cinematographic aspect, the film has a three-versed poem whose stanzas are recited before the kidnapping, during the rape, and at the scene of death in the desert. The lyrics are from a song called “Lupe” by various artists; the original composer could not be detected. Several versions are exactly the same as in the verses quoted in the novel with the name Lupe changed to “Doris” (DB 280). This intertextual device clearly refers to the fact that the horrors discussed are turned into a form of entertainment that devalues the women violated and murdered as will be analysed here. The first verse states,

“’Twas down in Cunt Valley, where red rivers flow, where cocksuckers flourish and maidenheads grow, ’twas there. I met Doris, the girl I adore, my hot fucking, cocksucking Mexican whore” (DB 280).

The first verse depicts in poetic language the meeting of the child and the perpetrator. The language is crude, while also lyrical. This contrast shows that those guilty of the crimes are to a certain extent educated, conceivably positing them in positions that are more influential. “Red rivers flow” aestheticizes the abundance of blood that flows because of the killings. While those who are constructed as moral “grow”, lose women are described as “flourish[ing]”, directly referring to the fact that their fate is a different one. The victim is degraded and hypersexualised, while still a clearly one-sided romantic entanglement is reported through the verb “adore”. Doris’ ethnicity is emphasised for the reason that she is constructed as the Other in contrast to the American norm. The process of Othering hypersexualises and dehumanises the body of the Mexican girl, she is rendered through ascriptive clichés that objectify her; she is not a child, but her body is a depicted as an object that is created to be used by men. She lacks all kind of agency, her struggle against the much larger man proves hopeless.

“Now Doris popped her cherry when she was but six, swinging upon El Diablo’s big prick, the upright slipped in, and she finished her life in a welter of sin” (DB 281).

The narrator recounts Doris’ first experience of violence, sexualising the experience of the devil violating a very young child and, again, ascribing sexualised notions onto her body; it is now her who “finished her life in a welter of sin”, meaning that she alone is to blame for the brutality she experiences. She falls into the hands of prostitution, and, thus, loses the morality in the eyes of the Mexican society; thus, she lives in sin. This again plays into the constructed narrative of immorality of Mexican girls and women. The child is depicted as disposable, and those who attempt to cleanse the Mexican society from the alleged immorality brutally murder her.
“Now Doris is dead and buried, and lies in her tomb, while maggots crawl out of her decomposed womb, the smile on her face is a sure cry for more, my hot fucking, cocksucking Mexican whore” (DB 281).

Her death is nonchalantly narrated, but the main focus of the description lies on the destruction of her femininity, her reproductive organs, which are “decomposed” and filled with “maggots” crawling in them (DB 281). Her reproductive ability has been destroyed, and the public cleansing is finished. The poem end with the attribution of “whore” and her alleged “cry for more” as her body, rid of all humanity, is still sexualised in death. The cruel depiction in the film of a brutally murdered child is juxtaposed with an interpreted “smile on her face” that cannot be seen anywhere as her body is deformed. The constructed smile plays into the discourse of self-infliction. She is portrayed as having enjoyed the ordeal, which shows that the sexualised violence and execution is enjoyable to the child. Additionally, “Doris” is not “dead and buried”, but her body lies in a desert “nothing but sagebrush all around her” (ibid.) and “radio towers in the distance” which will, as the novel shows, never report about her; she is merely another victim. Thus, it is her tomb, her final resting place, as no one will be looking for her.

The clear depiction of sexualised violence functions not as a depiction of sexualisation, but as a plot device that renders the true horrors of Lone Ranger’s business. Quoting a pop song is an intertextual device that shows that the violence committed is both used for entertainment and enjoyment. The tension is created through the affect of horror, hopelessness and Ivon’s realization that J.W. has kidnapped her sister to brutally violate and execute her. The climax of the novel functions as a clear revelation of the horrors committed in the text and the desperate attempt of Irene to escape the clutches of evil.

7.5. Detailed Descriptive Language in Desert Blood

In contrast to If I Die in Juárez, the descriptions of sexualised violence are not sexually charged; the language used is detailed and descriptive to render the true horrors committed in Juárez, while also serving the purpose of creating tension.

Before Ivon is aware of the role J.W. plays in the kidnapping of her sister, another body is found in the desert. The police and the medical examiner arrive at the scene only to hurry to another “fresh kill […] of a young transvestite man found earlier that morning […]. The transvestite’s mouth had been stapled shut. […] Ivon remembered that the judiciales had taken the stapler from her backpack” (DB 256). Here, the murder of a transgender person is depicted to show active police involvement in the murders. The transgender person was “the Cuban one
who had almost said something about the guy in the cowboy hat in Irene’s picture” (ibid.); thus, as a person who is aware of the perpetrators and the crime itself, they become a danger to those involved in the criminal activities, including the police. Here, sensationalist language is used to create fear and tension. Words used such as “fresh kill” (ibid.) remind of the splatter genre, and the repeatedly emphasised lack of investigation in the case hints towards a conscious decision to affect readers. The tension increases further, as Rubí states that this is “[a]nother voice without an echo. Two in one morning, bringing the death toll to 139” (ibid.). Thus, the transgender person is simply one more number of the hundreds of women found each year, who knew too much about the crimes and whose alleged immorality was an aspect that had to be cleansed.

Another example of the detailed language regarding victims of the femicides is the Prologue. Desert Blood’s in medias res beginning opens with the focalisation of a kidnapped, unnamed woman, who was abducted at the fair—the same area which Irene is later kidnapped at. Thus, the depiction of the cruel kidnapping in the first chapter functions as a foreshadowing of the cruelty that Irene will then experience. The description of the rape and murder is shocking, as the unnamed focaliser suffers violent abuse at the hand of “a man hitting her face and another one she recognized from the factory [maquiladora] pushing a syringe into her stomach” (DB 2). They sedate her and “slic[e] into her belly. […] She tried to scream but someone hit her on the mouth again, and someone else stabbed into the bag of water and bones—that’s all it is, the nurse at the factory once told her, a bag of water and bones” (ibid.). The beginning does not even the implied reader into the story, but depicts the core of the novel, i.e. the cruelty committed against women. The prologue is sensationalist in the sense that it creates tension and moves the plot forward through the detailed description of sexualised violence against a girl, whose name is never revealed. She is only another number, but her story stays in the head of the implied reader, when Irene is kidnapped and is the victim of the cruel murderer. Thus, the first chapter already foreshadows the cruel events that will be depicted in the remainder of the story.

The murder of Cecilia, who was supposed to be the surrogate mother or Ivon’s child functions quite similarly; it depicts the cruelty that the perpetrators are capable of. When Ivon reminisces about the murder, she is affected to an extent that the pain Cecilia and her unborn son experienced on their bodies is projected onto Ivon’s. “She needed to scrub the scent of death off her skin but could not remove the image of Cecilia’s body from her mind, a permanent stain in her memory” (DB 77). Here the narrative of dirtiness and skin-washing in the context of sexualised violence is interesting insofar as the concept of feeling dirty after the scene of rape
has occurred is directly transferred onto Ivon’s body. She sits in the shower and drinks beer while drying, “[s]hampoo[ing] her hair twice” (ibid.), which hints towards the typical reaction to sexualised violence committed on the body of the surviving person. However, here, the notion of shame is completely left out. In contrast to survivors in If I Die in Juárez, Ivon hurts, she feels “a permanent stain in her memory” that is in the moment of showering projected onto her body, but shame is not contextualised as an affect. This allows the narrator to imply that the victims and survivors are not part of the blame.

Elsa, Ivon’s second choice as a surrogate mother, states that she was artificially inseminated without giving consent at a mandatory pregnancy test at her workplace, which functions as a device to control women’s bodies in the Maquiladoras. This, again, denies women agency, the rights to decide about their own bodies and rids them of their humanity, as the treatment objectifies them. The gynaecologist “put something else inside [her], something different. I don’t know what it was, but it was sharp, almost like a needle. It hurt so bad, I could feel myself bleeding. And then he told me I had to lie with my legs up for fifteen minutes.” (DB 91). It is made clear that “[h]e inseminated her, Ximena, to test his contraceptive” (DB 92). It is later revealed that she was very likely raped as well but was too scared to admit it. The close emotional connection of the murdered women to the protagonist makes the femicides more visible and embed them in the private realm of the focaliser. The murders are directly communicated to the implied reader through the eyes of someone who is very close to them. As both victims are pregnant and the murder of the foetus itself (only one survives), highlights the cruelty even further. The reason for murdering the two surrogate mothers is explained by Ximena, who states that one theory contextualises the existence of a black-market that harvests organs from young female bodies, who had been laid off due to their pregnancy, which hints towards a connection between economy and structural violence. Still, the murders, the rape, the non-consensual actions are not important for institutional forces, as “lots of women are dying in Juárez these days” (DB 85). Instead of exasperating, Ivon decides to find the reason behind the murders and injustices committed on the bodies of female migrants, and then, on the body of her U.-S.-born sister.

It is the transcendance of the public violence into the private life of the main character, Ivon, that evokes the affect of inescapability; each girl or woman is endangered. The clear and detailed language used depicts the horrors that are committed in the city of Juárez.
8. Sensationalist Techniques

8.1. Shame in If I Die in Juárez

After having delineated the acts of sexualised violence committed, the aspect that has to be analysed now is the aftermath from the perspective of the victim. The emotion of shame is omnipresent in *If I Die in Juárez*, and it is continuously experienced by victims of sexualised violence. Probyn sees the interconnection of body and mind in the affect of shame, in which the “mind depends on the body; shame would be nothing without this dependency, this attraction for the abject, this voyeurism of the body. Which means that the mind is ashamed of the body in a very special manner; in fact, it is ashamed for the body” (Probyn 80). Especially in traumatic events, the mind-body dualism becomes more pronounced; here, they might even completely separate, in order to protect the victim (cf. ibid.). In the aftermath of the sexual violence committed against Evita’s body, when she is again confronted by her abuser, she experiences the very pronounced affect of shame; her cheeks turn red and her body reacts to what she sees as her past naivety.

[Ricardo] held no attraction for her anymore. In fact, she wondered what she had ever seen in him and felt her face burn with shame. (IIDJ 234)

The bodily reaction shows that the emotion is never just psychological but is very much grounded in the physical realm as well. However, the aspect of shame in this instance is interesting insofar as it focuses on Evita’s projection of blame on herself, instead of on the perpetrator of sexual violence. Here, the question arises as to why these mechanisms occur.

The reaction is not merely triggered by the sight of her violator, but the shaming occurs by culturally defined ideologies that frame the violence that is committed against her body as her own fault. Femininity is equated with the guilt for sexualised violence. Whereas, the male perpetrator’s reaction to seeing Evita is pure hatred and disgust. His affective response is a reaction to his possessiveness towards her, motivated by his son on her arm. He feels entitled to the woman, whose innocence he has taken. This takes such a degree that he threatens to brutally murder her, shouting “‘[y]ou deserve to die!’” (IIDJ 235), knowing that he would not suffer repercussions for it.

“There are women’s bodies being found in Juárez, thrown out like so much trash—what’s one more body? Who will believe that you didn’t return to the streets and were killed by some narcotraficante, or a crazed maniac?” (IIDJ 240)
He is certain in his knowledge that the murder of a sex worker would not be investigated by authorities. Evita’s reaction is a bodily one, she “felt a knot in her stomach. Her face flushed with anger and fear” (ibid.). Here, again the cultural constraints of her female body show that it is from birth onwards formed by and embedded in social and cultural constructs that it cannot transgress or subvert (cf. Probyn 76); thus, emotions are, consecutively, prescribed by the society that the body is embedded in (cf. ibid. 77). Especially when experiencing shame, the interconnection between mind and body is significant. Here, the mind actively directs its emotions to or against the body (cf. ibid). Evita projects the shame onto her own body, her mind cannot comprehend the traumatic experience. Even though it is clear that Ricardo violates his duties as a stepfather, it is Evita who needs to fear for her life. This encountering is defined by its subjectivity, in the sense that it belongs to the individual; however, the emotion of shame is not at all isolated from the outside world but shows that it is the woman’s obligation to be ashamed of her body, which is constructed as immoral in the society of the text.

Another example is Gustavo Rios, who funds Petra and her family’s trip from their hometown to Juárez. He is merely interested in their money, as Petra “sensed this stranger was ready to pounce on their misfortune, making it seem as if all that mattered to them was making money” (IIDJ 46). At the realization that someone is willing to use her family’s lives in order to profit from their hardship, she feels “[s]hame and anger collide[…]” (IIDJ 47) which elicits an emotional outburst, which, indeed evokes surprise in herself about her own physical reaction and the words she utters “boldly” (ibid.). Here, she is not able to rationalise her behaviour in the face of her affective state.

Similarly, Petra treats Antonio “especially kind even though he had insulted her about going to the party” (IIDJ 254) as he evokes the affect of shame in her. She blames herself for his reaction, as she does not behave the way society wants her to, i.e. obeying her fiancée’s orders.

Thus, even though the affect of shame is created particularly in events of a sexually violent nature, where male violence is committed against the female body, the novel also portrays shame in the context of patronisation of degradation for the character’s gender. Despite the clarity of who is the victim and perpetrator, the roles are inverted, and the woman blames herself, and gets blamed by society for the sexual violence or the behaviour that is chastised by the male characters.
8.2. Sexual(ized) Focalisation in *If I Die in Juárez*

As already briefly mentioned within the last two chapters, the murders and scenes of rape are narrated in detail and frequently focalised by the perpetrator of the crime. This chapter will delineate how this sensationalist technique is used and why, arguing that the implied author *If I Die in Juárez* uses this narrative feature in order to create affect and draw the reader into the plot.

Through sensationalist techniques the implied reader is enabled to be a voyeuristic onlooker; the femicides are broken down into a fictional form for them to digest. The implied reader is able to stimulate their interest of the murders through the detailed descriptions. At an event of sexual debauchery hosted by Augustín, Evita tries to flee the when she after notices a helpless young woman wearing the white dress the murderer forces his childlike victims into before executing them. However, she directly runs into the arms of the police officer who had sexually molested her, who, again threatens to teach her a lesson by taking her life. This encounter depicts the inescapability of her situation; structural power is deeply ingrained in the criminal ways of the underground scene.

However, even though the perpetration is illustrated, the affect created through the sexualised violence in the club is one of eroticisation. The omniscient narrator continuously refers to the “erotic sexual beat made for stripteasers”, the “[c]olored lights flashed on, whirling wildly on stage” (IIDJ 193). Cristal’s dance is described in a sexualised way, because her body’s allure is highlighted. The description of the sexual acts convey consent, as sex workers and their clients are referred to as “couples” (ibid.), who sneak into “private rooms for their use” (ibid.), while “women gave [the host] admiring sensual looks” (IIDJ 191). Sex workers are continuously reduced to their “skimpy” (IIDJ 189) clothing. “[A prostitute’s] legs were open and the short skirt she was wearing hugged her hips tightly. Evita could see the man had his hand between her legs, and the girl was laughing and leading him on” (IIDJ 190). The verb “leading him on” (ibid.) implies that the woman consents and possesses the necessary agency to voluntarily seduce the male guests. Thus, the roles are swapped, as the *customer* is depicted as submissive, which inadvertently blames women for the sexual violence committed against them.

The debauchery depicted abruptly changes when Evita is drugged by a man, who violates her by “thrust[ing] himself inside her. Evita screamed and pulled away, but he held her down hard” (IIDJ 194). Here, I argue that rape is used as a plot device, in order to juxtapose the erotic tone of the sexual encounters with the dangers that female sex workers face. Evita is
methodically raped by each person in the room. The chapter ends with serial rapes, which are described hazily through Evita’s eyes, who is too drugged to comprehend the violence that is committed against her.

All night, in the red haze of the room, Evita saw faces over her that blurred and changed into monsters, appearing and reappearing: el Junior, Chano, the policeman, the man with the slanted eyes—and Rudy, saying take her out, she’s too drugged up to walk. And finally Cristal’s hands on her body, Cristal’s voice, telling her something that Evita couldn’t make out, an echo in her head like the voice of her mother calling her home. (IIDJ 194)

However, the eroticised affect that the narration of the club evokes is still palpable even at the end of the chapter. The sensationalist techniques used here show that the narration plays with affect in order to immerse readers. The representation of true events is of secondary nature, as the depiction of brutality is emphasised for the sake of sensationalism. The true incentive for delineating the crimes in this context is the immersion of the implied reader. This is further emphasised by the description of Evita’s mutilated and brutally raped body as well as the traumatised state she is in after the events. Her coping strategy involves the externalisation of her pain through “the invisible spikes […] like sharp daggers”, which “made her skin burn with pain” (IIDJ 227). The suppressed pain and trauma are expressed through her body in order to sensationally depict the suffering caused by the male guests. Further descriptions of her body refer to a “drifting in and out of a dark tunnel”, a “whirlwind” that would “suck her in so far she’d never crawl out alive” (ibid.). The metaphoric descriptions of reality show that she is caught between two sides; i.e. wanting to live and hoping to die. These emotions are projected onto her body—her “legs twitch[…] and hands shak[e…]” (ibid.). The emotions are clearly portrayed on her body, which guides the implied reader through her psychological and physical state. I argue that it is evident that the implied author’s aim is not to represent the sexualised violence committed here, but to depict a brutal crime scene that eroticises the rapes committed in order to emphasise the ruthlessness and immerse the implied reader.

To follow up on this argument, I am jumping ahead to one of the last scenes in the novel, in which Petra is mutilated by Augustín. The maquiladora worker is lead into the arms of Señor Augustín Miramontes and his gang members. Their brutality is rendered in detail, which functions as a voyeururistic sensationalist technique to posit the reader within the events. The kidnappers refer to her as “cargo” (IIDJ 291); one man “grab[s] Petra by the wrist and dig[s] his fingers deep into her flesh” (ibid.). Their ruthlessness is portrayed “as if it was all a big
joke” (IIDJ 292). The narration illustrates the affects of fear and inescapability that Petra suffers. Affectively the implied reader is able to understand that “there would be no escape for her and that Vina Salcido was not coming” (IIDJ 293). Vina, a fellow envious maquiladora worker, is merely “part of the plan to bring her” (ibid.) to the location of the murderer, while being aware of the consequences Petra will be facing.

Additionally, it is through the kidnapping, which is planned to the most minute detail, that the implied reader understands the inescapability of the structural violence. The femicides are committed because the perpetrators enjoy them. The highlighted cruelty functions as a method to sensationalise the events. In contrast to Desert Blood their actions are not motivated by economic profit but by the pleasure derived from torturing women. This simplification acts as a sensationalist technique to create a binary between good and evil, female and male, victim and murderer. The categories are tightly set. While the male characters oppress the women in their lives to varying degrees, the female characters lack any form of agency, their categorisation functions in binary oppositions. Particularly Hilo, one of Augustín’s gang members, sexualises the violence he observes and commits. When Petra is brutally tortured, Hilo functions as a focaliser, casting a male and sexualised gaze on the scene. He “record[s] it all, his one good eye pressed up to the camera lens” (IIDJ 307.), so Augustín and his friends are later able to re-watch the torture “commenting on the most brutal parts, moaning with pleasure and devouring the scenes with howls and shrieks” (ibid.). All of the men who revel in the pain the women feel are described in animalistic terms, they are stripped of their humanity. Other members of the gang “couldn’t be trusted with the filming” (ibid.), as they “got too excited about cutting up the women’s bodies” (ibid.). The torturing of the women is described in detail with a sexual undertone.

He wanted to see blood and guts, gouge out their eyes, cut off their ears, their breasts, their arms and legs, split them open, and carve out their hearts. He would hold their hearts still pumping, in his hand, then lift hem over his head as if they were trophies. (IIDJ 307)

The detailed description highlights both the brutality of the scene and the inhumanity of those committing the murders. However, Hilo is, in contrast to the other gang members, framed as a character that deserves empathy. Here it is the omniscient narrator’s choice to inform about young Hilo’s abuse by the hands of his grandfather before describing the brutality Hilo directs against Petra. Hilo’s grandfather perceived “sewing was women’s work and he was un joto, gay, for doing that” (IIDJ 306) and, therefore, stuck a needle into Hilo’s eye, while helped his
grandmother sew. This part functions as a plot device insofar as the brutality shown in the case of Hilo, who is both the abuser and the abused, depicts the deterioration of humanity in a society that pressures children to conform to certain roles. Sewing, which is traditionally connoted to be female labour—partly because it is situated in the private sphere—is, here, met with violence and brutality. The patriarch does not accept what he observes and constructs as feminine and, consequently, gay, behaviour. It can be deduced that this example functions as a reminder that Hilo’s empathetic side is destroyed by Machismo culture. The implied reader is compelled to commiserate with the child that was moulded into a misogynistic killer. This plays into the notion that men are not biologically evil, but that they are socialised in a society that preaches certain values. Here a clear binary and essentialist view of gender can be seen.

Still, in the end, Hilo turns out to be the brutal executer of the women who are tortured in Augustín’s villa.

Hilo was patient. A woman like Petra would have never given him a second look. Yet, when he picked the women up, listless in his arms, held them in a blanket, walking out of the dark red room with them, the women thought he was saving them. They clung to him, begging to be rescued—if they could still speak. He like it that they begged him for mercy. (IIDJ 307)

He clearly enjoys the power he possesses over the tortured women in their last waking moments. The male gaze allows only his point of view, as well as his thoughts and affective state in the situation. Thus, only a sensationalist and brutal depiction of torture is rendered through the eyes of the torturer himself.

Pain penetrated her. Every opening in her body was bloody and aching. There were bright lights that went on and off and hurt her eyes, blinding her. Her legs were held apart and extended, as if she was flying. Often she could feel chains on her legs, her throat, her wrists. There was blood issuing from her body, and more blood and fluids she tasted in her mouth. At times a rag was stuck deep into her throat, and her mouth filled with a taste so bitter she wanted to vomit but couldn’t. Then there was darkness until the rag was pulled out of her mouth. (IIDJ 307)

Additionally, once the focalisation returns to Petra’s point of view, the sensationalist brutality that is cast on her misère continues to be highlighted. It is not her thoughts that are emphasised but the hatred the torturers project onto her body. Petra’s mind and body have lost their connection, she “watch[s] […] [her body] curiously from the headboard and from a
window high up on the wall” (IIDJ 308). However, despite her broken body, her spirit would not “submit” (IIDJ 308); the woman who feeds and washes her tells her to “[g]ive up. He wants your soul. You must surrender” (ibid.). Augustín is repeatedly described as “consider[ing] women his property and less than animals” (IIDJ 312).

Augustín is merely the stand-in for an entire flawed system. He represents patriarchy and machismo culture, which socialises men to live certain values and ideas. In contrast to Desert Blood, this novel finds the reason for the murders in the problem of the Mexican culture. The perpetrator, in a sense, is the historically grounded cultural devaluation of women. Through socialisation the male characters are formed into what they are. While Augustín symbolically depicts the violence, each male character is constructed as a perpetrator in his own sense.

8.3. Anticipation in Desert Blood

As the genre of the detective novel is characterised through its capability of creating anticipation, this affect is particularly important for the analysis. As the mutilated bodies are described in detail, affect is evoked in these narrations.

Rubí, the television broadcaster who investigates the femicides in Mexico warns Ivon that “‘[n]o girl is safe in this city anymore. It used to be just girls from the south who were in danger, but now, they’ll take anybody’” (DB 241). The Othering of Southern female migrants creates the affect of anticipation in the sense that a worsening of the situation can be experienced. The process of Othering has the effect of delineating a gradual advancing of the crimes from the outskirts to the centre of the city. Additionally, an alleged worsening is experienced, as those women who are constructed as moral are now endangered too. The characters are now increasingly aware of a possible pornographic reason behind the killings.

Rubí argues that “[everyone]’s just a cardboard figure. In Juárez, only two institutions have power: the government and the maquiladoras. Even the police are nothing but pawns” (DB 242), to which Ivon muses whether these institutions were working together and were administrated by “U.S.-educated rich men” (ibid.). Shortly after their conversation another body is discovered “in a nest of garbage and human hair” (DB 244). The narrator depicts the body in detail which creates anticipation and tension in the implied reader because it is not clear in the beginning whether it is the protagonist’s sister whose life has been extinguished. The cruelty of the murder is carefully rendered. The narrator illustrates that “[a] bottle of J&B had been inserted in her anus. The ground stank of urine and rotted flesh” (ibid.), referring to the fact that the body had been decomposing already. The portrayal is sensationalised due to the detailed narration of cruelty projected onto the body. However, I argue that through this narration the
events are not sensationalised but the hatred that is projected onto the female body is emphasised to raise awareness of the brutality. The murder does not function as a plot device in this case, but a rendering of the ruthlessness committed.

Slowly the men lifted the body over the mesquite bush and laid her down on the sand faceup. The bottle dropped out. The scalp loosened from the head. The stench of rotted flesh rose out of the land like a vapor. [...] Ivon forced herself to stare at the body. The eyes were gone. The face was completely bloated and purple, facial features erased, blistered skin crusted with sand and blood and maggots. Front teeth edged in gold. It wasn’t Irene. A thick black rope burn ran across her neck and teeth marks covered the chest. The bra was pushed up over the breasts. Worms oozed over the torn nipple of the left breast. On the right breast a five-pointed star had been carved into the flesh with a serrated blade. (DB 246)

The victim referred to here is completely stripped of her humanity and subjectivity, she is deprived of her womanhood and agency. Along with her eyes, her biologically female features are unrecognizable; she symbolically carries the misogynistic hatred of an entire society on her mutilated body. It becomes clear that the male characters’ central aim is the destruction of the female body and its humanity behind it. Their incentive is to warn other women who dare to transgress norms and ideologies that society has constructed. Monárrez Fragoso argues that the dumping of bodies in remote areas full of filth, are important indicators, but at the same time the most dramatic aspect of their murders is the falsification, deception, and imitation of what these girls and women represented in their different social and cultural realities. When these nude and semi-nude bodies are left abandoned and neglected, their historical identities, citizenship, and territorial specificity are taken from them. (95)

It is then that they become “sexually fetishized commodities” (ibid.). Within the novel, this is mirrored by Doctor Laura Goddoy’s examination of a mutilated body. She states that the reason behind the brutality of the murder is the hatred these men feel towards women. “[T]hey cut off the breasts or immolate the face, as we’ve seen in some cases, or insert sticks and bottles and other foreign objects into the bodies” (DB 248). Thus, the detailed description is essential here insofar as it serves a higher purpose, i.e. showing that the murders are structural and committed due to the hatred that is felt against the female body. Later, Ivon muses about the murders as she researches for her academic thesis.
The threat that pregnancy posed to “free trade” revenue. The heavy policing of female reproductive power in the maquiladoras to safeguard that revenue. The use of pregnancy tests to filter the desirable from the undesirable, who were still desirable in another context. The overt sexualization of the bodies—not just murder, but violation and mutilation of the maternal organs, the breasts and nipples, the wombs and vaginas. The use of the Internet as a worldwide market for these same organs in easily accessible tourist sites and affordable online pornography. A cost-effective way of disposing of non-productive/reproductive surplus labour while simultaneously protecting the border from infiltration by brown breeding female bodies. (DB 333)

Again, women are contextualised as an alleged threat due to their reproductive powers. This hatred creates affect as it sensationalises the true events in Juárez and represents the most gruesome acts of violence. Rubí recounts the cruelty that occurred to Ivon’s first choice for surrogate mother, Cecilia, whom “…they violated […] as much as they could, and they stabbed her in the belly so many times, they almost sliced through the baby’s neck” (DB 48). This depiction moves forward the plot insofar as Ivon has to stay longer in Juárez and starts researching the events surrounding the murders. The closeness to the victims adds an emotional layer which, again, works as a plot device to move the storyline and help formulate a reasoning behind the murders.

In contrast to If I Die in Juárez the scenes of abuse do not focus on the perpetrators’ focalisation but on the victims’ point of view. The implied reader experiences the abuse and the hopelessness of the situation through the eyes of the one being violated. This prevents the sexualisation of abuse and creates the affect of tension, simply because the victims themselves experience fear and terror.

In contrast to the depiction of violence in If I Die in Juárez, Irene is not depicted as helpless and above all she is not victimised. Her vigour projects itself onto her survival as even when she is scared for her life, she reminds herself to discover as much about the murderers as she possibly can, and she has “to remember their names. Memorize their names” (DB 172). She attempts to learn the location she has been taken to, even if it causes her physical pain to stand up and look outside of the window. She hides her knowledge of Spanish, as “[i]t's better if they don’t know she understands Spanish” (DB 174). Her rendering of the events functions as a sensationalist technique only insofar as the implied reader is able to realize who the perpetrators are and connect the murderers with the male characters who were already introduced in the storyline. The fear Irene feels is projected onto her body, she feels a “sharp pain claw[…]
through her intestines” (DB 268). Particularly when Irene hears a girl being brutally raped by her kidnappers, the voices of their commands carry to Irene who experiences the noises but is secluded from all visual cues. The sensationalist nature of the affect creates tension in the respect that Irene is aware that her moment is gradually advancing; she is the next “‘lucky penny’” (ibid.), who will hear the “boss” (ibid.) commanding Dracula to “[f]uck the shit out of her, man. Camera Two, keep tight on the prick. Camera One, body shot from behind. That’s it. Hump the little bitch. I want to see some spunk in one minute” (ibid.).

However, it has to be stated that the depiction, even though it is cruel in nature, does not sexualise the events, the implied reader is affected negatively, meaning that Irene is always in the background listening in terror. The main focus lies on Irene’s fear, whose “stench of panic is thick in her nostrils” (ibid.). She is not able to block out the situation as “her hands are tied behind her back and she can’t cover her ears” (ibid.). The inescapability of the situation creates the tension that moves the plot forward.

Irene’s experience is narrated through her eyes. In the tiny room in which she is imprisoned, she suffers a severe lead poisoning from the pennies that were inserted in her body. She releases herself in terror and “she rolled sideways to vomit. There was already a pool of it on the floor, the smell of color of rust” (DB 291). It is here revealed that she had indeed been sexually abused as she states that “[t]he raw skin down there burned from the soap” (DB 292), while she is being washed. Here, the tension is created by not stating the abuse she has suffered, but by hinting towards it, by leaving the worst unsaid. However, Irene is not once described as weak, as she purposefully spits out the pill that would sedate her body before being violated by her kidnappers, and then takes the example of Ivon as she “knew her sister would do whatever it took to escape. Kick the woman [who washed and imprisoned her] in the face” (DB 293). Her legs are described as “strong” (ibid.), and she attempts to flee. The chapter ends on a cliff-hanger that creates anticipation.

She is indeed able to escape the clutches of her torturers. Ivon saves her in the end from both the perpetrators and their viciously trained dogs. However, it is then revealed that she “saw raw bite marks all over her breasts. One had nearly torn off the nipple” (DB 303), depicting the violence committed against Irene. Even though she is saved, the anticipation increases, as the impact of the sexual violence are still present in the narrative and the effects are yet to be discovered. In the last chapter the true impacts are delineated, and the process of healing is thematised.
8.4. The Hopeless Open Ending in *Desert Blood*

Ivon is able to save Irene by shooting and killing the trained German Shepherds that belong to the Lone Ranger, the border patrol officer, who tries to kill both Irene and Ivon for the snuff film production. Right before both of them are saved by the ambulance, “a woman [said] in English” (DB 303) to—who is later revealed to be—the caretaker, to “’[g]et those dogs out of here, now’” (ibid.). After repeatedly stating that there “’were trained dogs’”, “’Silver and Tonto. Taught to respond to movie lingo’” (DB 308), whom Ivon “shot” herself (DB 306), she is still not believed. The authorities state that “’we seem to have a discrepancy here, Miss Villa, between what you’re saying happened and what the witnesses we talked to at the scene said’” (DB 305). “[A] caretaker up there”, who called the ambulance reported to seeing “a pack of coyotes” (ibid). She describes in detail that the

“dogs were trained to attack and kill. And this border Patrol guy, this Captain J. Wilcox, he’s a pervert and a stalker, and he staged my whole arrest so he could haul me up to ASARCO and have me watch my little sister getting ‘melted down to bacon.’ That’s how he put it, the sick fuck. He’s running an extreme pornography web site, extremely extreme, and I think he uses the dogs to dispose of the women he kills online…” (DB 308)

The officers do not accept Ivon’s testimony, continuing to believe the version that supports Mexican and US law enforcement, even though the proof is visible on Irene’s body. She muses in her car on the way back home that the silence that veils the topic of the femicides is the true issue behind the inescapability of the murders.

A huge malignant tumor of silence, meant to protect not the perpetrators, themselves, but the profit reaped by the handiwork of the perpetrators. A bilateral assembly line of perpetrators, from the actual agents of the crime to the law enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements. The cards fell so perfectly into place, it was almost nauseating. This thing implicated everyone. No wonder the crimes had not been solved, nor would they ever be solved until someone with much more power than she, with nothing to lose or to gain, brought this conspiracy out into the open. (DB 335)

The inescapability of events, the perpetuality of the femicides is depicted in Ivon’s incapability of making her voice heard. The rape of Irene is never thematised, but, even though
“[t]hey didn’t find any traces of semen […] there was evidence of penetration...and a lot of bruising” (DB 310), as well as pieces of wood that leads to the discovery that wood was used to violate her. The negative anticipation is created through the fact that the situation in Juárez is inescapable. Ivon has the potential to make her words publicly accessible through her dissertation, as the newspapers and television stations will not report about the true events. The media merely fabricates the innocence of the killed officers that were part of the pornography site. It is the active portrayal of inescapability that is broken down to the content level. Even though Irene survives, she will suffer for the rest of her life. Additionally, her survival is meaningless in the big picture, as the story is never heard. The perpetrators are left free to roam, those who lost their lives are celebrated, and the city’s law enforcement keeps protecting those who commit murders against poor brown women. Rubí’s husband, Walter, who allegedly printed a child pornography film on Ivon’s video tape is murdered by those who lead the snuff site; however, Rubí herself and her daughter disappear after his death, after Ivon confronts her “realized something was very wrong” (DB 313), she “‘know[s] what’ on it’” (ibid.). She begs that her “family is at risk here. If that tape gets broadcast, it’ll ruin me. It’ll ruin my entire family” (DB 314). It is not revealed, whether it truly is Walter’s fault, or if Rubí is aware of the illegal business. However, the entrenchment of the crimes in society depicts the true nature of the pervading femicides. They are committed by broadcasting people—who, in the case of Rubí—actively fight against the brutal violence on national television, police officers, and Border Patrol officers.

The epilogue describes the days afterwards, the hours of healing and finding the way back into society. Irene is embraced by her loved ones “and her bed was a zoo of stuffed animals” (DB 336), as well as other loving memorabilia brought by her family members. The picture painted is one of consolation and ordinariness, the events of the days before are not conceivable, as they are overshadowed by family life. Ivon and Brigit have finally adopted a child named Jorgito. They dine in close company and the family seems to find their solace in their togetherness, healing through their love for each other. However, even though the epilogue paints the picture of a normal day in the lives of those surviving, preparing food, recovering from trauma, and revelling in each other’s company, the pain they are healing from will not be forgotten. The chapter before reveals the true ending of the novel. It closes with Gloria Anzaldúa’s quote “‘the Third World grates against the First and bleeds’” (DB 335), marking an open end. The femicides not solved, the brutality still continues, and Ivon’s dissertation is yet to be written.
9. Conclusion

The analysis has shown that Gaspar de Alba and Pope Duarte use affective and sensationalist techniques to represent the femicides and depict the perpetration by men in a society that condones misogynistic behaviour. Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders repeatedly evokes the image of hopelessness and inescapability; the murders committed in this novel are to such an extent economically motivated that escape is never a possibility, even though the main characters survive the brutality. In If I Die in Juárez there is a clear tendency towards blaming socialisation for the precarious situations in which the female characters find themselves. The justification for the violence committed is linked to a macho backlash for allegedly disrespected gender roles.

On the basis of the theoretical part, the analysis of the novels was multifactorial. Both novels use generic conventions to affect implied readers. Desert Blood uses the generic conventions and includes intertextual devices to make aware of the crimes committed in Ciudad Juárez. Here, fiction, i.e. the detective novel, is juxtaposed with facts about the femicides; the implied author attempts at authenticating the narrative to a certain extent. The detective genre is conventionally a highly affective one, which it also proves to be in this case. The narrator includes clues for the quest for the kidnapped sister, Ivon. Two such elements are the symbols of the pennies and the train, which both function as a symbolic foreshadowing of the perpetrators and the scene of crime. The pennies also thematise the female body as a commodity to be sold and bought in the illegal market of human trafficking. The symbol of the train ties in with this argumentation and creates a bridge between US perpetration due to economic and political involvement in Mexico.

In If I Die in Juárez, intertextuality is not included to embed factuality in a fictive context but to affect the implied reader. As female characters externalise their inner world through the device of dreams, these places function as an affectively charged environment in which the implied reader is able to glimpse into the lives of those who are surrounded by danger and violence. Apart from creating affect, dreams are used as a plot device due to their clairvoyant abilities to foreshadow imminent danger in the character’s near future. The analysed poem is not embedded for its literary value but for the emotional connection Petra has to it; it affects the implied reader by accentuating her struggle, and at the same time symbolises the immense power that lies in her to overcome the hardship through the positive energy of the song that communicates her past with her.
Another focus is the depiction of sexualised violence in both novels. While Desert Blood individualises perpetrators in order to visualise the ones who are to blame for the femicides, If I Die in Juárez focuses on the cultural level of perpetration, meaning that violence is created through socialisation and cultural power structures. While the first novel blames economic injustices, first and foremost established by American interference, the latter focuses on the social and cultural environment that breeds inequality and, thus, condones sexualised violence committed against the stratum of society most in need of protection.

In If I Die in Juárez, male characters are overgeneralised into perpetrators\(^5\). Even those whose backstory shows the implied reader a human side are, throughout the book, turned into ruthless and misogynistic characters. For example, Petra’s fiancé, Antonio who is described as a loving person, does not support Petra’s independence, as she asks to go a party on her own, which she has to attend allegedly to meet important people from her workplace.

Focalising the graphic depiction of brutal acts through the eyes of the perpetrators conveys an image of ruthlessness and perpetration. For example, Hilo is shown basking in the glory of his actions after brutally mutilating Petra’s breast—a body part that stands as a pars pro toto for her femininity.

Hilo had sewn Petra’s engagement ring into her left nipple, and said he was marrying her off to all of them. And to think she had never been invited to her own wedding, he added with a smirk. (IIDJ 316)

Here, the individualisation is not a rhetorical device to define one single perpetrator but a way of showing the culturally bred hatred against women in the individual to render the affects felt on a societal level graspable. In the next section, I will argue that, when contextualising the entire work of fiction, each male character is in some aspect vilified, by either showing his views and opinions on female lives or committing concrete violence against women. Overall, the first aspect refers to societal norms and ideas that are seemingly depicted in the lives of and represented by each character in the novel.

In contrast, Desert Blood crystallises a few specific perpetrators who are stand-in personas for an economic and structural phenomenon that focuses on the perpetration of the

\(^5\) There is one clear exception to this, namely the American soldier, Harry, who is stylised, in part, as the white saviour from the North. He both saves Petra from the clutches of Augustín and later stands by her as she founds her organisation. However, an analysis of this would burst the constraints of my thesis; thus, I had to leave this part—hopefully—for further research to come.
US-government and US-owned companies in the South American countries. The ringleader of the snuff film production is himself a border police officer and is an American citizen. Thus, I argue that the novel focuses on the perpetration of a few, albeit powerful, people, in order to depict the structural nature of the problem.

The novel operationalises the perpetration by men, by characterising those who are part of the crimes as having important positions in politics and economy, namely police officers, people in the entertainment section, and even women higher up in the maquiladoras. This is essential insofar as it portrays the heavily thematised aspect of institutionalisation within the context of sexualised violence in Desert Blood.

Both novels heavily work with sensationalist techniques to allow the reader to bear witness of the crimes committed on the bodies of female characters. In If I Die in Juárez, the affect of shame is predominantly used to show in how far the body of survivors is embedded in a cultural context that frames them as immoral and guilty by default. Those who have suffered sexualised violence are constructed as guilty in a society that punishes women for the crimes committed against them. Now, an interesting discovery has to be mentioned. If I Die in Juárez, frequently uses the focalisation of the perpetrators, which sexually charges the scenes of violence. When focalising through the point of view of the perpetrator, a voyeuristic gaze is put on scenes of extreme violence. As a result, the author chooses to sensationalise the events and immerses the implied reader into the text.

Moving on to Desert Blood once again, the generic convention of the detective novel allows for a genre that creates highly affective situations through anticipation and tension. The mutilated bodies and the scenes of sexualised violence are partly described in minute detail, but not for the sake of sensationalising the events but to depict the cruelty that is committed. For example, the focalisation is always the victim's one, or one that finds the situation abhorrent. Thus, the events are always critically questioned and seen through the perspective of those experiencing or reflecting on the crimes. Here, awareness is spread, but those suffering from the crimes are not commercialised. In the end, the main characters in Desert Blood all survive, and they are shown healing the wounds that the system has caused. Irene is depicted in her wheelchair, but she is healing as well.

It is the ruthlessness of the Lone Ranger that allow a glimpse at the danger the female characters face each day on their way to and from work. The male characters possess the power to evade punishment for their actions. Their lawlessness is supported by a political and economic system; the crimes’ (almost) non-existing penalisation offers a glance at the structurally embeddedness of the injustice. Arguably, this is an affective technique, it
sensationalises the narrative, and creates tension and affect. The detailed descriptive language both renders the true horrors and serves the purpose of creating tension in this fictionalised account of the femicides. Affective techniques allow the implied reader to experience the affects, emotions, and bodily responses of the characters, and bear witness of the constant threat of sexualised exploitation and extreme forms of violence in the daily lives of the girls and women.

It is now important to consider in how far the novels that represent the cruel violence, each of them in their individual way, spread awareness of the femicides. First of all, through affective techniques the texts function as tools for drawing attention to the crimes being committed in Juárez. Even though the novels are fictional, the facts that are embedded in the fictional context allow, on the one hand, an analysis of the violence in the city, and, on the other hand, immerse the implied reader in a story of brutality and suffering that is far beyond their lived experiences—in the case of a white Western audience. Regarding the first point Desert Blood in particular embeds facts and theories of scholars and journalists in the fictional context of the novel to represent the true events; this spreads awareness in the sense that readers who might not be familiar with the crime wave are repeatedly informed about basic facts and various accurate theories discussed behind the femicide by authorities and NGOs. Thus, readers are able to delve into the depth of the violence through characters such as Petra and Ivon. As If I Die in Juárez is “[b]ased on the author’s interviews with relatives of murdered women” (University of Arizona Press, Online), also allowing an insight into the depth of the violence through the eyes of those impacted.

Second, Gaspar de Alba and Pope Duarte give a voice to the girls and women who are not able to make their pain heard. They are stand-ins for much larger generations of those segregated, silenced and discriminated against by structural forces. The literary context allows an understanding of intersectional oppressions that goes far beyond the topics of racial and gendered discrimination. The novels portray the struggles of sex workers, honour students, Maquiladora workers, and queer citizens and burst the conceptualisation of intersectionality that is often criticised to be practiced by mainstream feminism(s).

First, the authors inform about the crimes committed in Juárez through characters such as Ivon, Irene and Petra, who survive gruesome acts of violence committed against their bodies, and recover to spend the rest of their lives fighting for their emancipation and against the injustices committed against each girl and woman in their hometowns. Thus, throughout the entire novel, the authors stress that only an international awareness can contribute to solving the situation in Juárez.
As a last point I would like to emphasise that both the research conducted on the novels *If I Die in Juárez* and *Desert Blood* as well as novels written on the topic are scarce. It is a topic that is not exhausted by any means. I can only make assumptions about the lack of research on these novels discussed and the lack of literary works written on the topic itself. *Desert Blood*, which is a novel that has indeed gained attention, was published in 2005 in the Arte Público Press, “the oldest and most accomplished publisher of contemporary and recovered literature by U.S. Hispanic authors” (Arte Público Press, Online) and is also part of the University of Houston. Additionally, the text itself was awarded the 2005 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Mystery, as Ivon is a homosexual detective. *If I Die in Juárez*, however, was published by The University of Arizona Press, a publishing house that works “non-profit” and prints “scholarly and regional books” (University of Arizona Press, Online), which is by no means as well-known as Arte Público Press. Additionally, the authors themselves have very different name recognition; while Gaspar de Alba, whose work *Desert Blood* has been studied more often than *If I Die in Juárez*, has written several books, Pope Duarte is not as publicly known.

Even though one novel is slightly better known, the reception of both novels is meagre; which, in my opinion, can be put down to the fact that the international awareness of the crimes is lacking if not non-existing. News coverage of the femicides is, considering the magnitude of the violence, incredibly low. One related aspect might be processes of Othering that construct the suffering of the Other as non-newsworthy. Other reasons are without a doubt economic, as *Desert Blood*—and many scientific sources—hints towards.

The research on the novels has given me insight into the underbelly of humanity, it has made me aware of crimes that are omnipresent and brutal, but whose victims and survivors are not heard or supported. I chose the books because I strive for diversity, and I wanted to go beyond master narratives and a literary canon. I found them not because they were recommended to me—they are also (almost) impossible to get in libraries or bookstores—but because I detected them in my research after typing “Juárez”-related search-terms into the search browser. In the field of literary studies, the texts are not as thoroughly discussed as they could be. *If I Die in Juárez* is not at all thematised. Now the question remains why there is a lack of research in texts dealing with the femicides in Juárez. On the one hand, the topic is incredibly abundant, and theories are often merely guesses rather than fool-proof evidence. On the other hand the primary material is sparse, there are only a few literary works thematising the topic of the femicides in Juárez, and all of these works do not celebrate international success, as they are not written by famous authors but oftentimes by those being in the midst of the cruel events. These are major reasons that could explain why research in these areas is sparse and,
without a doubt, missing. The topic is not at all exhausted and would yield fruitful research that could shed light on many aspects yet unnoticed in the invisible crimes committed on the border to the United States.

Thus, I hope to have contributed to a field of study that has a lot of potential to thrive, in light of the extreme forms of violence and lawlessness. Furthermore, I hope to have succeeded in laying the foundation for a platform for those unheard voices that are to this day fighting for justice.
10. Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


The University of Arizona Press. *If I Die in Juárez*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press. 2019


